

CAPTAIN JIM MELTON OF THE CONFEDERATE SECRET SERVICE

Mary Lou Brand

Captain Jim Melton was the uncle of my grandfather, Jim Melton of Lynnville, Kentucky, who was named for him. He was a brother to my great-grandfather Samuel Melton, and they were born in Murray, Kentucky, on the spot where the Court House is now located. Captain Jim had two sisters, Emily who married a Waterfield in Murray, and Alice who married Isam Wilford of Mayfield.

The material for this article, parts of which have appeared in the Magazine of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, was taken from Captain Melton's diary of the Civil War. It was loaned to me by his son, the late Clarence Melton of Memphis, Tennessee. Captain Jim's daughter, Myrtle Dunn, lived in Water Valley, Kentucky.

Captain Melton lived many years after the War Between the States, dying in Memphis in the nineteen twenties. He has several grandchildren living there now.

Captain Melton's biography is a succession of adventures, part of which I found in his autobiography written after the War Between the States and some from the Commercial Appeal dated January 17, 1909. This article was written when Captain Melton was 77 years of age and was titled "A Secret Service Man."

He was a wanderer from the breaking out of the War Between the States until his death in 1921. He lived all over the State of Tennessee and part of Kentucky and Mississippi. He saw service afield and as a spy. He languished in military prisons, and upon one occasion sawed himself and companions out through four-inch iron bars with saws improvised out of steel case knives. He swam the Ohio River at Mounds City, Illinois, and returned to his native heath to raise another company. I took the following from Capt. Melton's autobiography and these are his own words: "It was only a short time until I had a company of fine soldiers and some of the finest fighting men that ever stood on any battle field. It makes me feel proud of my soldiers when I look back and think how many battles I had led them in and how they stood by me.

I helped to organize the 12th Kentucky Regiment and my company was Company G. The organization took place at Spring Creek on the road leading from Tresvant to Jackson, Tennessee. W. W. Faulkner was elected colonel and Thomas S. Tate major of the 12th Kentucky regiment. I met General Bedford Forrest there that day — I had not seen him since Fort Donelson and he stepped up to me and after we had shaken hands, he said, "I left you and two other companies at Donelson — I sent to reinforce Col. Hanson and when the surrender took place I was too far away to let you know, for I had to get out quick. I heard you got away from them the second time and was raising your third company." So Capt. Melton said "I was with General Forrest as long as the war lasted and when I resigned at Harrisburg I was in the secret service until the close of the war and was never suspicioned." Captain Melton had resigned from Forrest's command at the personal solicitation of "The Great Wizard of the Saddle" and spent dangerous months as a spy in the service of the Confederacy during which time he visited Cincinnati, Evansville, Cairo, Louisville and St. Louis. He had

narrow escapes by the dozens and his account of them is more interesting than a page of fiction.

When the War broke out Capt. Melton was town Marshall of Murray, Kentucky. At the breaking out of the War he went into the Confederate cause, soul and body. He threw up his job as town marshal and took the field to recruit a company for the Confederacy. He succeeded and enlisted with his command under Beauregard.

After the Battle of Bull Run he joined the Cavalry and was present at the siege of Fort Henry. At the fall of Fort Henry he succeeded in making his way with his command to join the forces under Forrest at Fort Donelson, and there took part in the memorable struggle which ended so disastrously for the South. Capt. Melton was surrendered with his company and was placed under guard as a prisoner of war and rushed North with hundreds of his comrades to old Camp Chase, Ohio.

At that time and in fact throughout the War, the Federal government was taking special pains to capture as many of the Confederate officers as possible. A special prison was set apart for Confederate officers at Johnson's Island, and so splendidly was it adapted to its purpose that it is on record that no Confederate prisoner ever escaped from it alive excepting such as were exchanged or otherwise set free with full knowledge and consent of the guard.

But if escape from Johnson's Island was impossible, escape from the train bearing prisoners to it was not, as Capt. Melton proved when he was picked out, with other Confederate officers, and loaded into a train for transportation to this lake vastness. "I jumped out of the car window," he said, referring to the incident, "and I hit the ground runnin'. The train was going about 40 miles an hour, I reckon, but that made no difference. I piled through that window head first and never stopped running." The fugitive Confederate soldier was alone in a hostile state. He was without money but not without resources. He made his way to one of the towns on the railway, and there procured money enough for his needs, and some definite information about his location. By railway he made his way to Canada. For two months he stayed in Toronto, Canada, and then made his way back through Detroit to Louisville, Kentucky. This placed him once more on Confederate soil, or at least on neutral ground. His journey to Clarksville, Tenn. and thence to Calloway County, Ky., was without special incident. Reaching Calloway County the intrepid young Confederate immediately set to work raising another company but had only partially completed his work when he fell into the hands or rode into a Yankee ambush and was recaptured.

The treatment accorded him upon his recapture was incredibly brutal. An eight-foot log chain, with a heavy iron ball attached, was fastened about his leg. Handcuffs were placed upon both wrists and a heavy chain was fastened from wrist to wrist. He was taken down the river and around up the Mississippi to Alton, Illinois, where stood the old state penitentiary, which was converted into a military prison.

In the Alton Prison Capt. Melton was thrown into a dungeon, unlighted, foul and noisome, and only 6x3 feet in size. He was half starved. His chains were kept on him day and night. He was refused parole and denied exchange. In fact every indignity and cruelty that could have been practiced upon a helpless prisoner was visited without stint upon him. It was not in the nature of the man to submit quietly. He made protests but they were laughed to scorn. He wrote a letter to Hon. Henry C. Burnett, a member of the Confederate Senate,

detailing the horrors and injustices, and demanding that steps be taken for his relief. The letter was captured by the Federal officers and its writer was subjected to more rigorous treatment than before. A second letter to the same party suffered the like fate, and so did a third. Then the Federal prison officials brought matters to a crisis. He was hailed before them and commanded to write no more such letters. "You go plumb to ——" was the answer. "I'll write what I please and whenever I please and to whoever I want to. What have I done that you single me out for such treatment as this?" Finally he got a chance to write a fourth letter to Mr. Burnett, and sewed it into the lining of the coat of a Confederate soldier who was going to be exchanged. "When you get back inside the Confederate lines mail that for me to Mr. Burnett," he begged. "I won't do that," was the answer. "I'll carry it to him in person."

That promise was fulfilled to a letter. The communication to Mr. Burnett is contained in Series II Vol. 5 of the official records of the United States Confederate Armies. The letter follows:

Military prison, Alton, Illinois, March 30, 1863. Hon. Henry C. Burnett, member Confederate Senate. My dear sir: In the utmost extremity, I address you. I can say but a few words as danger threatens both the medium of my communication and self. Hear me I conjure you and demand of my government immediate intervention for my deliverance.

Let hard facts speak for themselves and stern justice vindicate my claims.

I, J. F. Melton of Calloway County, Kentucky commanded a cavalry at Fort Henry in Tilghman's Division. At the surrender of Fort Henry I retreated to Fort Donelson and was thrown under Col. (Now General) N. B. Forrest; was captured after the surrender of Donelson on the 16th day of January 1862; made my escape enroute from Camp Chase to Sandusky on the 26th of April 1862; returned South for the purpose of raising a new company and while so engaged was recaptured on the 13th of July, heavily ironed with log chain and ball, transported to the prison, thrown into a cell 6 ft. by 3, with iron fetters on, kicked, cuffed, taunted, jeered, and maltreated in every conceivable form. I remained an inmate of this living tomb until my life was despaired of. I was then removed to the hospital where I have remained ever since. Denied the privileges of a common culprit, denied a parole, denied an exchange, several of which have left here during my imprisonment. To my demands they replied by adding insult to injury, in renewed insult and cruelty. I have had to run the gauntlet of every disease which human flesh is heir to — smallpox, measles, mumps, pneumonia; in a word all of the ills of Pandora.

"Oh, the horrors of this place, the cruelty of my persecutors, tongue cannot tell, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive. I have seen thousands of my companions in arms consigned to a premature and untimely grave by the cruelty and injustice of my enemies, murdered in cold blood in this lazar house of disease and death.

With me the sands of life are nearly run. There is but little left now. I rejoice that it was freely offered upon the altar of my country which I so devotedly love, and which I have the proud consciousness of knowing I have faithfully served. Will not that country now interpose her strong arm and rescue me from this carnal house, this living death, save the little life left me to my country and family?

Will you abandon me in this dire extremity? Will you leave me to my un-

happy fate in the iron hands of my most cruel and unnatural persecutors? "I do not, I can not believe it. I will not think so meanly of my country. She does not know of my wrongs. She cannot have heard of my most foul and unsoldierly treatment. Oh! My countrymen, how long will you suffer these abuses? How long will you permit your patience to be abused, your forbearance to be outraged and your humanity to be scoffed at by these unlettered and unthinking monsters? Act at once and deliver me from worse than death.

"How? Demand me under the cartel of exchange; unless surrendered throw into close confinement some influential Yankee officer and hold him as a hostage in pledge for me; make it known to the Federal government, and you will compass my immediate release. Refuse, and I am lost. The grave will soon be my end, yet one reflection will illumine my tomb and take away the sting of death, the consciousness that I fall a martyr to my country, blessing her with my last sigh in death.

Hear me I adjure you for my cause, for your cause, as sacred a cause as ever brought and bound a people together — the cause of our country and our God. Believing that you will instantly lay my case before the authorities at Richmond and demand that justice so long denied me, I am, your unfortunate but faithful friend,

J. F. Melton

Nineteen days after that last letter was written to Mr. Burnett a Federal officer came to Alton prison from Washington, to investigate Capt. Melton's case.

"Take the shackles off that man!" he ordered when he had made his inquiries and satisfied himself of the facts in the case. "He is no worse than any other prisoner of war," he declared. "He has the same rights as the rest of these men. Give him the freedom of the prison."

The order was obeyed, and thereafter Capt. Melton was able to get almost anything he wanted inside the Alton prison walls. Visitors were permitted to see him, and many of them brought him gifts of clothing and food. One day he whispered to one of them a request to bring him a couple of case knives and a small three-cornered file. "But I can't get them in past the guard," objected the visitor. "Put them in a Pone of bread," was the ready suggestion. "The guard will never suspect."

It was done. The guard passed the harmless looking bread without so much as a question. The case knives and the file were to the captive officer the keys to liberty. He carried them in the bread to his cell, and there took them out and quickly cut the steel blades into saws. He took several of his fellow prisoners into his confidence, and instructed them how to use the saws to cut through the iron bars on the prison windows. The men worked with a will, and in an incredibly short time the bars, four of them, were severed. Carefully watching the sentry past the opening, Capt. Melton dropped through the window and again, as when he escaped from the train in Ohio, he "hit the ground running."

He scuttled along in the darkness, going northwestward until he struck the bank of the Mississippi river. There he found a skiff, which he broke from its fastenings and paddled across to the Missouri bank, where he hid in the cane brakes until dawn. He then went to the house of a woodsman, who chanced

to be a Confederate sympathizer, and got breakfast and a change of clothing. He also obtained general directions for his flight. Leaving his friend the Tennessean, the captain procured a skiff and made his way to Mounds City, Ill. Here a disagreeable surprise awaited him. A brother-in-law, who was a rabid unionist, happened to be in the town, but the captain saw him first. "There wasn't any chance for him to see me after that," he told later. "I got into the hotel there, and hid for four hours — till I saw him start out of town with his team. Then I came out and told the clerk I wanted to stay all night, and that I was a drummer. 'I've got to get up the Ohio River as far as Metropolis, and from there over to Vienna; and I've got to be back in St. Louis in four days,' I told him. 'I have money to pay a driver and a good team, and I want to start early.' We started early the next morning and rode up the Ohio as far as Old Caledonia, of a ridge, and the Confederates charged down the slope of an opposing ridge,

There I stopped the buggy under a big tree. "I don't want to go up the river," said I, "I'm going across the river right here. I'm a Southern man and I'm going to the Southern Army, I expect to be with Forrest in seven days." "Great goodness" the man said, "You can't cross the river here. Why the Federals haven't left a boat or a dugout nor even a log anywhere and they're watching this stream like hawks. You couldn't make it if you had a boat." I laughed and took off my coat. I paid the young fellow for the use of his horse and buggy and then went down to the river. I lay on my back with my hat on my shoulder, and swam across that way, watching the men on the bank and watching up and down the stream. Nothing happened and I got up and waved my hat to them on the other side and struck out for an old man I knew living near there.

To this friend the captain appealed for a horse, but the man, though a loyal Southerner, was afraid of the Yankee troopers stationed about. He told him to go down to the bend where he would find a lot of "niggers", as the old man called them. To the bend the captain took his way. But the Negroes demurred also, pleading fear of consequences. The captain simulated great anger and broke into profanity, declaring that he felt like going back to Cairo and ordering the troops to come down and wipe them off the face of the earth. "Here I've come all the way from Washington to set you Niggers free," he stormed, "and not one of you will turn his hand to help me when I get here." The bluff had its effect. The credulous Negroes fairly fell over each other in getting him what he wanted. A horse was furnished him, and one of the Negroes went along a way for a guide. He rode on to Lovelaceville, Ky., where he found himself suddenly confronted by a detachment of Yankee troopers.

"Gentlemen, there's a big Rebel army coming!" he shouted. "Ride for your lives!" "Where are they? Where are they?" They demanded. "Right behind me and coming like hell fire," he shouted. The Yanks waited for no further information. They wheeled and burned the wind. He rode behind them, and as they swept down one fork of the creek, the captain took the other fork and went on his way with a chuckle. He worked his way back to Calloway County, where he completed the task of raising his third company.

There was a stirring incident at the Battle of Harrisburg, Miss., in which Capt. Melton took a prominent part. The Yankees were posted along the crest of a ridge, and the Confederates charged down the slope of an opposing ridge, but the order was suddenly given to fall back. The Confederate advance halted; the Yankee fire was poured in upon their backs with galling effect. Some one shouted that the color bearer had fallen, and it was too bad to leave the company colors on the field. Capt. Melton returned to the right about, strode back across the draw and up the slope to where the color-bearer lay dead across the

folds of the blood-stained colors. He turned the body over and lifted the flag. He bore it back through a rain of bullets that continued without interruption until he neared the crest of the ridge, when the Yankees turned loose a small field piece and the shrapnel began hurtling across the ravine after him. He turned at the top of the ridge and shook the colors at his foes. The firing ceased. It was years after the war that he heard from one of the Yankees who had shot at him that day. He began telling one day of the intrepid "Johnnie" who had carried the colors off the field at Harrisburg. "I reckon I fired fifty shots at the man," he said, "and I never tried so hard to hit a mark in my life. When he got to the top of the ridge and the cannon was turned loose the blamed fellow turned and shook the colors at us, and I heard the Colonel order them to cease firing. He said that a feller that would do that way oughtn't to be killed. I'd like to meet that Reb sometime."

Soon after the Battle of Harrisburg Gen. Forrest sent for Capt. Melton. "I want you to resign your command," he said, "I think you can do your country a better service in secret service work for me." Not even to his wife did he divulge at that time the new sphere of his operations. It was a hard life and a dangerous one. It is easy to imagine, however, that it proved attractive to this man of iron nerves and ready wit. "I've never had but one set rule," the Captain said, "and that was to mind my own business and not talk too much."

In the name of God Amen, I, Augustine
Brouder of the County of Fenton and Corn, th
of Kentucky Being of Sound Mind and memory
But of Physically Weak, and Afflicted in Body
do make this my Will and Testament hereby
Revoking all others heretofore made by me,
1st I will and Bequath my Soul to God who
gave it

Item 2.^d I will and request and desire that all of
my Just debts and liabilities be paid, when they
are Brought up legally and rightly and duly
Authenticated.

3.^d I will and Bequath To my beloved wife
Jurea A. Brouder One Bay ^{mare} Hussy and ant
Caw, and all harness belonging to the said hussy
4th I will and desire that my said wife Jurea
A. Brouder shall ^{share} Equally with all my sons viz
James M. John, Isamuel & Pleasant and Geo
A Brouder in all the money which may be
found on hand at my death, and also to be
Equal Share in all moneys arising from the
Sale of my property (Personal) hereafter directed
to be sold,

5th, I will that all of my personal property
found on my premises be sold to the highest
Bidder and equally divided among my wife
and sons before named; share and share alike
with the exception of my Burial Expenses. Including
Tobacco, stonks, Apparel &c, and also a comfortable
Years provision for my said wife, consisting of
all the necessaries of life such as Corn wheat,
Sugar & Coffee Molasses Pork, or Bacon and all
other articles used in comfortable living in
families.

With an order to make my Youngest Son
George & Brother Equal with my other sons
before named to whom I have heretofore
given Land, I will and bequeath to him the
farm on which I now live together with
improvements on the premises containing
160. acres of Land, more or less - to be
had by him the said George at my death
7th, I will deave and appoint my six sons
all, my Executors to this my last will and
Testament all to be equal in the execution of
the same, nothing as before said all others
Signed, Sealed &c, in the presence of the under
Signed Witnesses on the 25th of Dec: 1873 -

E. G. Kimbro

Malicki Smith

D. J. Bowdler

Agueste & Co. Secy
H. A. D.