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A pioneer from the 1850s, Part 4

Hans Mattson

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A pioneer from the 1850s – Hans Mattson tells the story of Vasa



Part IV

(continued from SAG 2/2008)

After Vicksburg

About a week after the surrender of Vicksburg, the Third Regiment was transferred to the Seventh Army Corps, under the command of Gen. Fred. Steele, and took part in the campaign against Little Rock. In the beginning of September, when we were only ten miles from Little Rock, our regiment enjoyed the distinction of marching at the head of the infantry column. We came upon the Confederate batteries on the west bank of the Arkansas River, where a brisk cannonade was opened. This combat afforded the most beautiful sight imaginable, if carnage and slaughter may be called beautiful.

We stood on the east side of the river, the Confederates on the west. The water being very low, a steamer had been grounded about an eighth of a mile above us, and near the steamer the water was so shallow that the cavalry could ford the river; but just in front of the Third Regiment the water was so deep that we had to throw a pontoon bridge for the infantry.

Our regiment was stationed in a corn field near the river bank to cover the march across the bridge, and the soldiers were ordered to lie down on the ground. But we found it very difficult to make them obey, for, in their eagerness to cross the river, they felt more like rushing ahead and shouting for joy. Many shots from the Confederate batteries passed over our heads, so low that the soldiers,

in a sporting mood, jumped up and grabbed with their hands in the air, as if trying to catch them. In less than an hour the bridge across the deep channel was ready. A cavalry brigade had meanwhile moved up to the ford above, and now the signal for crossing was given. The Confederates set fire to the steamer, which they were unable to save.

It was about noon on one of those glorious autumn days peculiar to this country, which greatly enhanced the impression of the sublime spectacle then to be seen on the Arkansas River. The burning steamer reddening the atmosphere with brilliant flames of fire, a long line of cavalry fording the shallow river in three files, the infantry marching by the flank over the pontoon from which they jumped into the water, forming on double-quick, first companies, then battalion, whereupon they marched cheerily, in knee-deep water, under flying banners and to the beat of regimental music, while the air was filled with shells and balls. Before the infantry had reached the woods where the batteries of the enemy were hidden, the latter were already in retreat, and Little Rock soon fell into our hands.

In Little Rock

On our march into the captured city the next morning, the Third Regiment was again accorded the place of honor at the head of the army. It was designated to act as provost

guard for the purpose of maintaining order, and the whole regiment was soon quartered in the state capitol.

Gen. C. C. Andrews, who held the position of colonel at that time, was appointed post commander at Little Rock, and I, who had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel soon after the surrender of Vicksburg, took command of the regiment, whereby it became my duty to maintain law and order in the captured city. This was an onerous and difficult task, for it must be remembered that the only executive authority in the southern states during the war was vested in the army, and especially delegated to the provost officers and guards.

The Third Regiment was occupied with this task until the following spring, and performed its duty so well that the governor of Arkansas, in a message, expressed himself regarding it, in the following language: "During the time of their service in our capital good order has prevailed, and they have commanded the respect of our citizens. When called upon to meet the enemy they have proven themselves equal to any task, and reliable in the hour of imminent danger. Such men are an honor to our government and the cause which they serve. Their state may justly feel proud of them, and they will prove themselves to be worthy sons of the same wherever duty calls them."

Toward Christmas I was ordered to Fort Snelling, with a detachment of officers and non-commissioned officers, for the purpose of recruiting

decimated ranks. I remained on this duty till the month of March, and then returned with four hundred recruits. Shortly afterwards the battle of Fitzhugh's Woods, near Augusta, Arkansas, was fought, and the regiment distinguished itself by very gallant conduct. During the stay in Little Rock most of the soldiers had re-enlisted for three years, or until the close of the war, whereby we acquired the title of "Veteran Regiment."

But that was not the only distinction which was conferred on our men. A large number of young soldiers had been promoted from the ranks to be officers in several negro regiments, which were organized in Tennessee and Arkansas, and some as officers of new regiments of our own state.



Col. Andrews had meanwhile been promoted to the rank of brigadier general, and, in April, 1864, I was promoted to colonel of the regiment in his place, and was shortly afterwards ordered to march with its eight hundred men to Pine Bluff, on the Arkansas river.

Moving to Pine Bluff – a bad place

From this time until the beginning of August the regiment experienced such hardships and sufferings from diseases and hard service, that it sustained far greater losses from these causes than any other regiment from our state had met with in open battle. Pine Bluff was a veritable pest-hole; the water was of a greenish color, the air full of germs of disease and poisonous vapors. Continually

surrounded and threatened by a vigilant enemy, the exhausted and sickly soldiers had to get up at three o'clock every morning for the purpose of working at the entrenchments and strengthening and protecting our position in different ways. Meanwhile the number of those fit for duty was daily decreasing at an appalling rate. The hospitals were overcrowded with patients, and the few men left for duty were continually occupied in caring for the sick and burying the dead, until there were not men enough left to bury their dead comrades, and I was obliged to ask a regiment, which had recently arrived, to help us perform that sad duty.

On furlough in Minnesota

At this critical moment I received orders from Washington to take six companies to Minnesota, on a six weeks' veteran furlough, to which the regiment was entitled. Those went who were able to. Many died on the way, but those of us who survived until we reached Minnesota were soon restored to usual health and strength, so that we could return in due time and again take part in the campaign in Arkansas. The remaining four companies, which had been furloughed the previous winter, were ordered from Pine Bluff to Duvall's Bluff, on White River, where the whole regiment was reunited under

my command in the beginning of October, and remained in winter quarters until the spring of 1865.

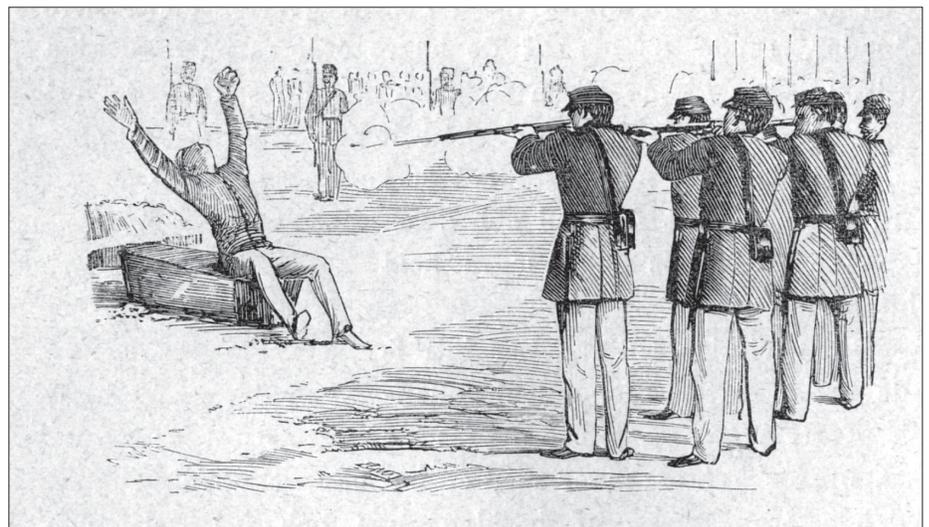
Back in Arkansas

Shortly after our return to Arkansas, I assumed command of the First Brigade, First Division, Seventh Army Corps. This brigade consisted of my own regiment, the Twelfth Michigan, the Sixty first Illinois, and a United States colored regiment. Our prospects for remaining in winter quarters for several months being favorable, many of the higher officers sent for their wives. I did the same, having first erected a comfortable log house for us. My wife and two little children arrived a few days before Christmas, and stayed in the camp the whole winter. No important event took place during the winter, excepting that we were once ordered to make an expedition up White River, with a considerable force of cavalry and infantry, and, after a fatiguing march, succeeded in breaking up a camp of irregular Confederate troops, and taking many prisoners.

Two incidents

I will relate two incidents which took place near Duvall's Bluff, one of a serious, the other of a comic nature.

The first was the shooting of a young soldier of the Twenty-second Ohio Regiment, who time and again had deserted his post, and finally



An execution of a deserter.



Hans Mattson in the Civil War.

joined a band of rebel marauders. It became my sad duty to execute the sentence of death. My brigade formed a hollow square, facing inward, and the doomed man, a strong, handsome youth of twenty years, sat on a coffin in an open ambulance, which was driven slowly along the inside of the square, while a band marched in front of the wagon playing a funeral march. After the completion of this sad march the deserter was placed in the middle of the square, in front of the coffin, with his eyes blindfolded. A detachment of twelve men under a sergeant now fired simultaneously, upon the signal of the provost marshal. Eight rifles were loaded with balls, and the unfortunate young man fell backwards into his coffin and died without a struggle.

Riding outside camp has its problems

One day while taking a ride on horseback in company with my wife, who had a fine saddle horse, and had become an expert rider during her long stay in the camp, we galloped mile after mile along the fine plain, outside of the picket lines where men of my own brigade were on guard, till at last we found ourselves several miles from the place where we had passed through our lines.

Returning toward camp, we struck the picket line at a point where a

recently arrived regiment was stationed, and where the ground was soft and marshy. Being challenged by the guard I answered who I was, but as he could not plainly distinguish my uniform in the twilight and did not know me personally, he ordered us, with loaded gun, to stand still until he could call the officer of the guard.

It was no easy matter to obey his order, for the horses continually sank down in the soft ground, but finally the officer arrived and we succeeded in getting to the camp without further trouble. I was not the first officer who thus got into trouble by neglecting to write out a pass for himself.

The murder of President Lincoln

On a fine April day, which can never be forgotten, the news came that our president, Abraham Lincoln, had been murdered. Stricken with consternation, I hurried down to the Third Regiment in person to tell the bad news.

Never, either before or since, have I witnessed such a scene as the one that followed. Some of the men went completely wild with sorrow, weather-beaten veterans, embracing each others, wept aloud, other swore and cursed.

In the prison yard, which was guarded by men belonging to my regiment, a rebel prisoner took off his cap, waived it in the air and cried, "Hurrah for Booth!" A man by the name of Stark immediately loaded his gun and shot the rebel dead on the spot. Many others, both inside and outside the camp, were shot because they expressed joy at the death of Lincoln. Passions were strong, and all tolerance and patience exhausted among the Union soldiers on that occasion. The main army of the Confederates had already surrendered when this calamity occurred, and the war was in fact over.

A few days afterward we sent our families home.

Editor's note:

Now that Colonel Mattson is safe and going back home we will leave him to go on with his life.

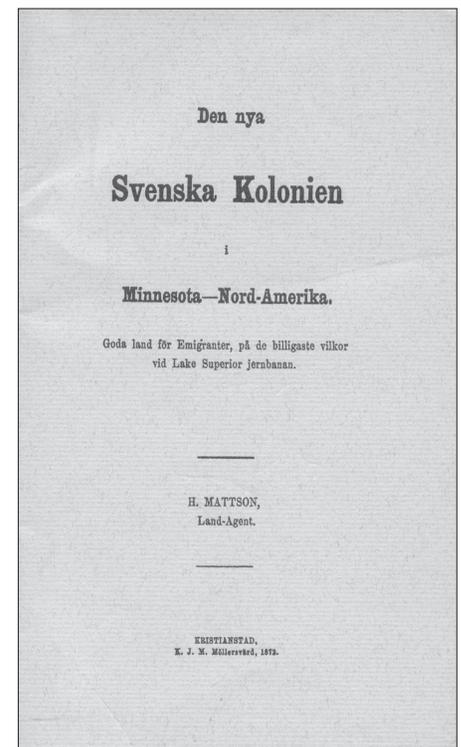
But what was he going to do during the rest of this life?

In 1866 he became the editor of *Svenska Amerikanaren*, published in Chicago, but resigned in 1867 to become an immigration promoter for the state of Minnesota. He returned to Sweden as a representative of the Minnesota Immigration Board in 1867–68 to recruit settlers, a successful undertaking. He brought almost 450 immigrants back with him.

In 1869 he became Minnesota's Secretary of State, from which post he resigned in 1871 and became the chief emigrant agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad, which had enormous areas of land that needed many new settlers.

Later he again became Secretary of State in Minnesota for 1887–1891.

He also helped found banks in Minnesota and other institutions. He also had a brief diplomatic career, was U.S. Consul General in Calcutta (1881-1883). Hans Mattson died 5 March 1893 in Minneapolis.



A booklet by Hans Mattson (in Swedish) about the good life in Minnesota, 1868.