

"Where Home Used to Be"

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Letter from Janie Smith to Miss Janie W. Robeson, April 12, 1865. Mrs. Thomas H. Webb Collection, Private Collections, North Carolina State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

As you read...

JANIE SMITH

Janie Smith was 17 years old in 1865. During the Battle of Averasboro on March 16, 1865, her family home, "Lebanon," was used as a Confederate hospital. In this letter, she describes the effects of the battle and its aftermath.

SHERMAN'S MARCH

After capturing Atlanta in the fall of 1864, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman marched his army to the coastal city of Savannah, Georgia — the "March to the Sea." Along the way, soldiers burned crops, killed livestock, took supplies, and destroyed railroads, mills, and anything else that might help the Confederate war effort. Sherman believed that the Civil War would end only if the South's ability and willingness to fight were utterly broken:

We are not only fighting armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as their organized armies. I know that this recent movement of mine through Georgia has had a wonderful effect in this respect. Thousands who had been deceived by their lying papers into the belief that we were being whipped all the time, realized the truth, and have no appetite for a repetition of the same experience. (Letter to Henry W. Halleck, December 24, 1864.)

After reaching Savannah, Sherman's army turned north and marched through the Carolinas. He intended to meet up with Grant's army in Virginia, and the army continued to destroy almost everything in its path. They fought Confederate forces at Averasboro on March 15 and 16 and again at Bentonville on March 19. Before Sherman could reach Virginia, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered his army to Grant, and at the end of April, Confederate General Joseph Johnston surrendered to Sherman, ending the war in the east.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How did Janie Smith describe the battle scene?

2. How did Janie describe Confederate soldiers? How was this description different from the words she used to describe Union troops?
3. How did JanieSmith and her family greet Confederate troops? How did they receive the Union troops?
4. How did Janie help the Confederate soldiers who camped at her home?
5. Where did Smith and her family hide their belongings?
6. How did the Union troops treat Janie and her family? How did Janie feel about this treatment?
7. How did the Union troops treat the African Americans who were slaves to Janie Smith and her family? How do you think this treatment might have effected the slaves choice to stay or leave the plantation?
8. Does Janie Smith sound as though she was about to surrender?
9. From this letter, do you think the efforts of Sherman and his men to “crush” the spirits of southerners was effective? Why or Why not?
10. At the close of her letter, Janie described some of the lasting effects of the battle. What does she say about the southern breeze?

Where Home Used to be.
April 12, 1865.

Your precious letter, My dear Janie, was received night before last, and the pleasure it afforded me, and indeed the whole family, I leave for you to imagine, for it baffles words to express my thankfulness when I hear that my friends are left with the necessities of life, and unpolluted (sic) by the touch of Sherman’s Hell-hounds. My experience since we parted has been indeed sad, but I am so blessed when I think of the other friends in Smithville that I forget my own troubles. Our own army came first and enjoyed the cream of the country and left but little for the enemy. We had a most delightful time while our troops were camped around. They arrived here on the first of March and were camping around and passing for nearly a week. Feeding the hungry and nursing the sick and looking occupied the day, and at night company would come in and wait until bed-time.

I found our officers gallant and gentlemanly and the privates no less so. The former of course, we saw more of, but such an army of patriots fighting for their hearthstones is not to be conquered by such fiends incarnate as fill the ranks of Sherman’s army. Our political sky does seem darkened with a fearful cloud, but when compared with the situation of our fore-fathers, I can but take courage. We had then a dissolute and disaffected soldiery to contend with, to say nothing of the poverty of the Colonies during the glorious revolution of ‘76. Now our resources increase every year and while I confess that the desertion in our army is awful, I am sanguine as to the final issue to the war.

Gen. Wheeler took tea here about two o’clock during the night after the battle closed, and about four o’clock the Yankees came charging, yelling and howling. I stood on the piazza and saw the charge made, but as calm as I am now, though I was all prepared for the rascals, our soldiers having given us a detailed account of their habits. The pailing^I did not hinder them at all. They just knocked down all such like mad cattle. Right into the house, breaking open bureau drawers of all kinds faster than I could unlock. They cursed us for having hid everything and made bold threats if certain things were not brought to light, but all to no effect. They took Pa’s hat and stuck him pretty badly with a bayonet to make him disclose something, but you know they were fooling with the wrong man. One impudent dog came into the dining room where Kate and I were and said “Good morning girls, why aren’t you up getting breakfast, it’s late?” I told him that servants prepared

Southern Ladies breakfast. He went off muttering something about their not waiting on us any more, but not one of the servants went from here, they remained faithful through it all, with one exception, and Pa has driven him off to the Yankees.

Mr. Sherman, I think is pursuing the wrong policy to accomplish his designs. The Negroes are bitterly prejudiced to his minions. They were treated, if possible, worse than the white folks, all their provisions taken and their clothes destroyed and some carried off.

They left no living thing in Smithville but the people. One old hen played sick and thus saved her neck, but lost all of her children. The Yankees would run all over the yard to catch the little things to squeeze to death.

Every nook and corner of the premises was searched and the things that they didn't use were burned or torn into strings. No house except the blacksmith shop was burned, but into the flames they threw every tool, plow etc., that was on the place. The house was so crowded all day that we could scarcely move and of all the horrible smelling things in the world the Yankees beat. The battle field does not compare with them in point of stench. I don't believe they have been washed since they were born. I was so sick all the time that I could not have eaten had I had anything. All of Uncle John's family were here and we lived for three days on four quarts of meal which Aunt Eliza begged from a Yank. Didn't pretend to sift it, baked up in our room where fifteen of us had to stay. When and how we slept, I don't know. I was too angry to eat or sleep either and I let the scoundrels know it whenever one had the impudence to speak to me. Gen. Slocum with two other hyenas of his rank, rode up with his body-guard and introduced themselves with great pomp, but I never noticed them at all. Whenever they would poke out their dirty paws to shake my hand, I'd give the haughtiest nod I could put on and ask what they came for. I had heard that the officers would protect ladies, but it is not so. Sis Susan was sick in bed and they searched the very pillows that she was lying on, and keeping such a noise, tearing up and breaking to pieces, that the Generals couldn't hear themselves talk, but not a time did they try to prevent it. They got all of my stockings and some of our collars and handkerchiefs. If I ever see a Yankee woman, I intend to whip her and take the clothes off of her very back. We would have been better prepared for the thieves but had to spend the day before our troops left in a ravine as the battle was fought so near the house, so we lost a whole days hiding. I can't help laughing, though the recollection is so painful when I think of that day. Imagine us all and Uncle John's family trudging through the rain and mud down to a ravine near the river, each one with a shawl, blanket and basket of provisions. The battle commenced on the 15th of March at Uncle John's. The family were ordered from home, stayed in the trenches all day when late in the evening they came to us, wet, muddy and hungry. Their house was penetrated by a great many shells and balls, but was not burned and the Yankees used it for a hospital, they spared it, but everything was taken and the furniture destroyed. The girls did not have a change of clothing. The Yankees drove us from two lines of fortifications that day, but with heavy loss, while ours was light. That night we fell back to the cross roads, if you remember where that is, about one sixth of a mile from here, there our men became desperate and at day-light on the sixteenth the firing was terrific. The infirmary was here and oh it makes me shudder when I think of the awful sights I witnessed that morning. Ambulance after ambulance drove up with our wounded.

One half of the house was prepared for the soldiers, but owing to the close proximity of the enemy they only sent in the sick, but every barn and out house was fill and under every shed and tree the tables were carried for amputating the limbs. I just felt like my

heart would break when I would see our brave men rushing into the battle and then coming back so mangled. The scene beggars description, the blood lay in puddles in the grove, the groans of the dying and the complaints of those undergoing amputation was horrible, the painful impression has seared my very heart. I can never forget it. We were kept busy making and rolling bandages and sending nourishment to the sick and wounded until orders came to leave home. Then was my trial, leaving our poor suffering soldiers when I could have been relieving them some. As we passed the wounded going to the woods they would beseech us not to go. "Ladies, don't leave your home, we won't let the enemy fire upon you." But orders from headquarters must be obeyed and to the woods we went. I never expected to see the dear old homestead again, but thank heaven, I am living comfortably in it again....

I will wait until tomorrow to finish my volume as Jess can't bear the light in his eyes and it is too dark for me. Sloke is quite sick with measles, took cold and I am staying with him while sister and Louise are out enjoying the lovely spring evening. All nature is gay and beautiful, but every Southern breeze is loaded with a terrible scent from the battle field, which renders my home very disagreeable at times.

On the web

Averasboro Battlefield and Museum

<http://www.averasboro.com/Default.aspx>

The battlefield, on the plantation lands of the John Smith family just south of the Cape Fear River town of Averasboro, is open for tours. The museum's website provides historical background about the battle.

Civil War Voices: Sherman's March

<http://www.nccivilwar150.com/history/ncvoices/sherman-voices.htm>

First-hand descriptions of Sherman's march through North Carolina in the spring of 1865, from the website of the North Carolina Civil War Sesquicentennial.

Sherman's Special Field Orders, No. 120

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherman%27s_Special_Field_Orders,_No._120

Sherman's orders to his army in November 1864 told soldiers to "forage liberally on the country during the march" and to "destroy mills, houses, cotton-gins, &c."

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Notes

1. Fencing made from wooden *pales*, or stakes.

About the author

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