YOU BOYS GOT COFFEE?

A Vicksburg remembrance | July 4, 1863

The cannons slept that morning,
The guns had ceased their roar,
And silence settled softly
Where death had walked before.

The Mississippi shimmered
Beneath the summer sky,
While thirty thousand weary men
Had somehow not yet died.

They came from dusty trenches,
Their uniforms worn thin,
With hollow cheeks and tired eyes,
And hunger deep within.

No longer proud battalions,
No banners raised on high,
Just boys who'd fought for causes
They could scarcely now define.

Across the broken earthworks,
Where enemies had lain,
A Rebel saw a Yankee boy
And called across the plain:

“You boys got coffee?”

The question hung between them,
So ordinary, small,
After forty-seven days of hell,
It seemed to say it all.

Across the Broken Earthworks

The Yankee reached into his sack
And pulled some coffee free.
The Rebel offered tobacco,
And said, “That's good by me.”

Two strangers stood together,
Where yesterday they'd kill,
And shared a little kindness
Upon a bloodstained hill.

Perhaps they spoke of mothers,
Of sweethearts far away,
Of fields of corn and Sunday bells,
And home on Christmas Day.

Perhaps they spoke of nothing,
For words were hard to find,
When yesterday's sworn enemy
Looked so much like your kind.

Then came the stacking of the guns,
The muskets laid aside,
The clink of steel, the thud of wood,
The swallowing of pride.

One rifle, then another,
Ten thousand, then ten more,
Till mountains rose of weapons
That would thunder here no more.

Some Rebels wept in silence,
Some stared upon the ground,
Some looked toward the river,
Where no salvation could be found.

The Silence After Battle

And Union boys stood watching,
Their victory finally won,
Yet saw no fearsome monsters—
Just another mother's son.

A father with a trembling hand,
A boy not yet eighteen,
A soldier who had dreamed of home,
And all the years between.

No cheers could fill the emptiness,
No flags erase the pain,
No speech could bring the fallen back
To walk these hills again.

And though the Fourth of July
Had come with victory's light,
The meaning of that freedom
Was still contested in the fight.

For freedom was a promise
The nation had not kept,
And far beyond those battered lines,
Enslaved mothers still wept.

The war was far from over,
The wounds were far too deep,
But Vicksburg's guns had fallen still,
And men could finally sleep.

No sharpshooter at sunrise,
No cannon in the night,
No need to fear the morning
Or brace for one more fight.

The Human Gift

Just coffee in a battered cup,
Tobacco passed around,
And men who once were enemies
Upon the same dry ground.

And somewhere in that summer heat,
Beneath a cloudless dome,
A soldier closed his weary eyes
And dreamed that he was home.

So when we speak of Vicksburg,
Of Grant and victory's fame,
Remember those who stood that day,
Each one with his own name.

For history counts the armies,
The battles lost and won,
But seldom hears the quiet voice
Of someone's hungry son.

And perhaps the truest story
Of that Independence Day
Was neither flag nor rifle,
Nor who had won the fray.

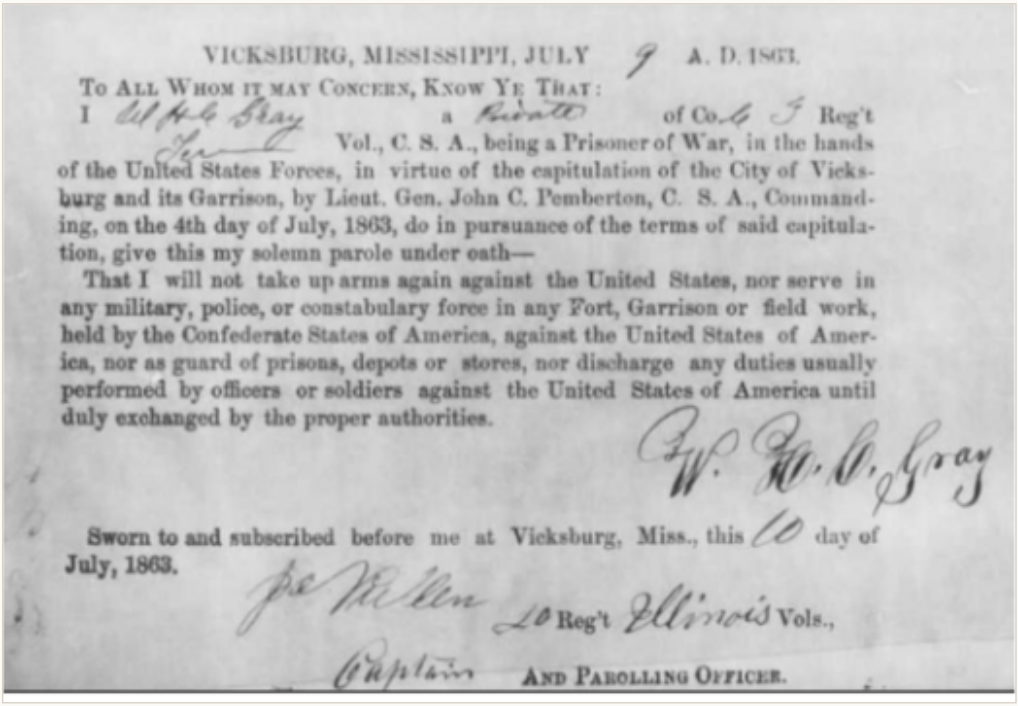
But one exhausted soldier,
With little left to share,
Who heard a stranger's simple plea
And answered it with care.

“You boys got coffee?”

Four words across a battlefield,
Where hatred had held sway.
And for a fleeting moment,
Humanity found a way.

The Surrender and the Men

A family-history collection of images supplied for this remembrance.



VICKSBURG, MISSISSIPPI, JULY 9 A. D. 1863.

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, KNOW YE THAT:

I W. H. C. Gray a Private of Co. G F Reg't Vol., C. S. A., being a Prisoner of War, in the hands of the United States Forces, in virtue of the capitulation of the City of Vicksburg and its Garrison, by Lieut. Gen. John C. Pemberton, C. S. A., Commanding, on the 4th day of July, 1863, do in pursuance of the terms of said capitulation, give this my solemn parole under oath—

That I will not take up arms again against the United States, nor serve in any military, police, or constabulary force in any Fort, Garrison or field work, held by the Confederate States of America, against the United States of America, nor as guard of prisons, depots or stores, nor discharge any duties usually performed by officers or soldiers against the United States of America until duly exchanged by the proper authorities.

W. H. C. Gray

Sworn to and subscribed before me at Vicksburg, Miss., this 10 day of July, 1863.

Jos Allen 20 Reg't Illinois Vols.,

Captain AND PAROLLING OFFICER.

William Henry Clay Gray's Vicksburg parole document.

The family caption dates his sworn statement to July 9, 1863.

A visual echo of the surrender:

rifles set down, one by one.

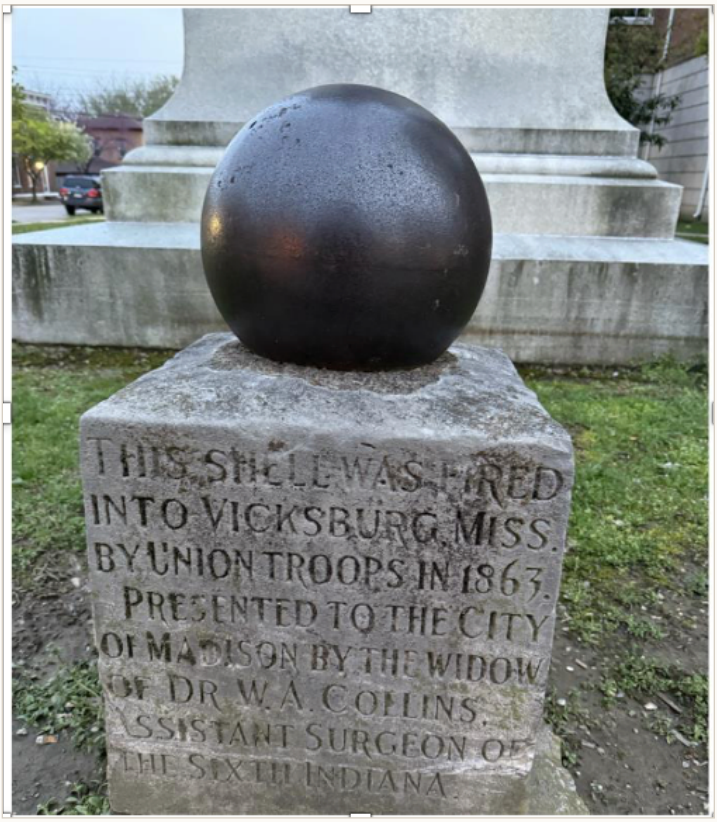
The sound of wood and iron
replaced the sound of guns.

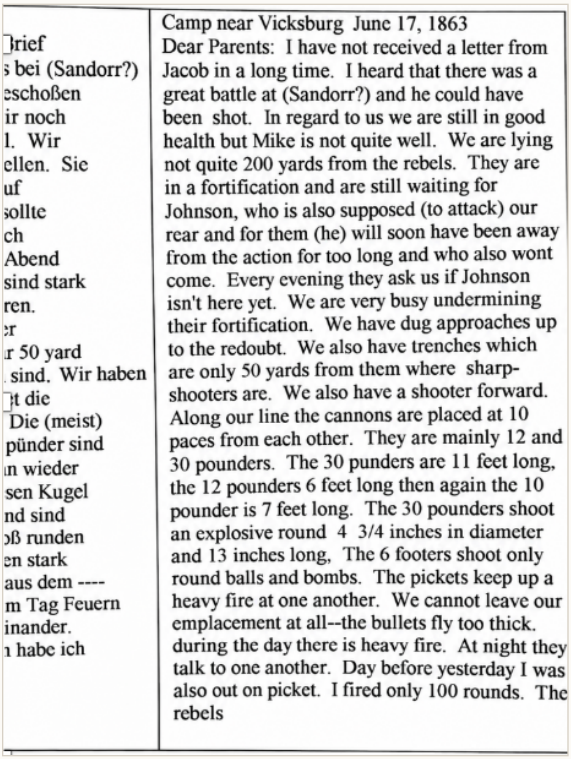


The rifle image is reproduced as supplied; its precise provenance is not established by this collection.

Voices and Remnants of Vicksburg

A shell, a letter home, and the people behind the battle.





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Camp near Vicksburg June 17, 1863
Dear Parents: I have not received a letter from Jacob in a long time. I heard that there was a great battle at (Sandorr?) and he could have been shot. In regard to us we are still in good health but Mike is not quite well. We are lying not quite 200 yards from the rebels. They are in a fortification and are still waiting for Johnson, who is also supposed (to attack) our rear and for them (he) will soon have been away from the action for too long and who also wont come. Every evening they ask us if Johnson isn't here yet. We are very busy undermining their fortification. We have dug approaches up to the redoubt. We also have trenches which are only 50 yards from them where sharp-shooters are. We also have a shooter forward. Along our line the cannons are placed at 10 paces from each other. They are mainly 12 and 30 pounders. The 30 punders are 11 feet long, the 12 pounders 6 feet long then again the 10 pounder is 7 feet long. The 30 pounders shoot an explosive round 4 3/4 inches in diameter and 13 inches long, The 6 footers shoot only round balls and bombs. The pickets keep up a heavy fire at one another. We cannot leave our emplacement at all--the bullets fly too thick. during the day there is heavy fire. At night they talk to one another. Day before yesterday I was also out on picket. I fired only 100 rounds. The rebels

Left: an artillery shell fired into Vicksburg in 1863, shown with its inscribed presentation marker.

Right: a June 17, 1863 letter attributed to Conrad and Frank, written to family in St. Peters, Indiana, in German and translated into English roughly a century later.

Images and family identifications supplied by the reader.