

“A MELANCHOLY ACCIDENT”: TEXAS, JULY 1864

*Benjamin F. McIntyre: Diary, July 29, 1864*

A Union expeditionary force of 6,000 men landed on Brazos Island at the mouth of the Rio Grande on November 2, 1863, and occupied Brownsville, Texas, four days later in an attempt to block Confederate trade with Europe through Mexican ports. Although the garrison at Brownsville was able to control the lower Rio Grande valley, the Confederates continued to export cotton and import supplies across the river west of the town. In the summer of 1864 the Union troops along the Rio Grande, now numbering 2,700, came under attack by a force of 1,300 irregular Confederate cavalry. After a series of skirmishes the Union forces evacuated Brownsville on July 29 and withdrew to the coast, where a small garrison would continue to hold Brazos Island. Second Lieutenant Benjamin F. McIntyre of the 19th Iowa Infantry had fought at Prairie Grove, in the siege of Vicksburg, and at Stirling’s Plantation before being sent to Brownsville.

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White House Ranch July 29th 1864

The Illinois 94th boys were favored with a ride from here on the Mustang, while the 91st Ill., 38th 20th & 19th Iowa under the command of Col Day of the 91st took up the line of march and by the judicious management in marching of Col Day we made this point at an early hour.

I Know not from what this place derives its name—if however a little white house the size of a hen coop is a white house and patches of cactus and chapperal on a barren sandy plain is a ranch this place must be rightly named. The 91st Ill. 20th Wis. have gone on to Brazos. I noticed on the steamer this morning the wives of Maj Pettybone, Capt Drake, & Lieut Yorke who has been on a visit to their husbands at Brownsville for several weeks past. At present we seem to form an Iowa Brigade our Colonel Com’dg.

In review of the past two days march of our troops It was as pleasant as could have been expected under circumstance. The Rio Grande was high and the country was flooded to a great extent and very many places the troops were compelled to pass

through water two and three feet deep. The roads were very muddy and the days excessively hot with occasional rain and in passing through the closely matted chapperal upon either side excluding every breath of air and yet not sufficient in height to afford a shade.

A provost guard, left at Brownsville after our departure to watch unobserved a few Strong Union men left behind, captured some half dozen who as soon as we had left raised the Confederate flag & took formal possession of the place in the name of Godly "Jeff"—they were brought along as the guards did not think Brownsville a healthy place for them.

A melancholy accident happened this morning. The 20th Wis. & 94th Ill. were in camp with the Division last night at Union Ranch and for which two steamers were sent up last evening on which they were to embark. The boats were lying side by side in the stream. The two regiments were ordered upon them at an early hour—it was very dark and no lights were placed on the boats so that the troops could desern their way distinctly over piles of freight of every variety. The 20th Wis. Reg. were to take the outside boat—necessitating them of course to pass over the inside one. The river was full banks, the current very swift. Each man had his Knapsack strapped to his back and of course had also a full set of equipments beside his cartridge box containing forty rounds. One of the soldiers of the 20th thus equipped in passing over boxes, coils of rope, barrels, wood, tents &c made a misstep and fell into the river. As I Stated the river was high & swift and it was very dark. The unfortunate man Sustained himself upon the water for some time and had floated quite a half a mile. A yawl was put after him which in the confusion took minits to unloosen and got to within a few feet of the drowning man when he sank.

It would be folly in me to say anything regarding this matter—it is but a reiteration of many similar cases and was occasioned merely by officers not properly attending to their duties and not attending to the care of their men—a single lantern upon the bow of the Steamer would have Spared this meloncholy accident. He will soon be forgotten and the incidents attending his death be lost among the things of the past so far as his regiment is concerned, and the country will forget such a man ever existed—Yet far distant in the Badger

State near a little glassy lake are hearts who will preserve his memory green. It was a happy home and joy and happiness has lingered in the little domicil with its shades of vine—Sorrow henceforth will be its companion and that little glassy lake will mirror back the pale tearful faces of that once happy household desolated by the lack of care by the officer who was over him who today would be among us had ordinary precaution been taken and usual care exercised. The two days march has been a hot one—the 2d day while under the command of Col Day was rendered comfortable as far as marching is concerned for he understands how to march men—which not one out of a dozen of our Commanders do understand.

Gen Herron complimented his men on the dispatch with which they accomplished this march. Compliments are very good but when a man has been compelled to do his utmost & can do no more, compliments—even from a Major General—proves no balm—rather let our Generals use discretion and a little sense and his men will prove hereafter of benefit to him. Under the circumstances his compliments are in bad grace.

Gen Herron and his immortal Staff left this evening by steamer for Brazos. Two steamers—the James Hale and Mustang—remain here.

Col Bruce will receive orders from the General tomorrow probably regarding our future.

Col Dye is at the Island where his wife lies dangerously ill—it is a happiness for the husband to meet with his family after a long absence, yet here to some it has brought a great sorrow—the Surgeon of the 20th Wis. buried his wife at Brownsville—Lieut Yorke a staff officer left an interesting little child. Others were quite sick and came near their end and now they are left in a strangers land—a land soon to which no Union man holds any claim—but amid the chapperal and cactus they will rest—the mockingbird will carroll for them his morning anthem while gentle breezes will waft over them its orange laden breeze. O how oft will the Kindred heart of loved ones yearn for this sacred Spot and wish their dead could repose in their own native soil. Over them sad memories might call up pleasing recollections and in their sorrow find a melancholy joy which is now forever denied them.