

E
474.18
.M33
1891

74
25

Connecticut State Library



3 0231 00079 7139

TITLE OF IRISH BEND

INTERESTING REMINISCENCES OF
THAT TERRIBLE COMBAT

THE HORRORS OF WAR GRAPHIC-
ALLY PICTURED

Col. Bissell's Bravery—Sad Death of John H. Hunt—
Destruction of the Rebel Gunboat "Diana."—Gal-
lantry of the Union Soldiers—Shrewdness of Con-
federate Commanders.

[An address given before the people of St. Patrick's Church,
Collinsville, April 23, 1891, by Major Thomas McManus, of the
25th Reg't., Conn. Vols.]

CONN. STATE LIBRARY

AUG 15 1925

474.18

.M33

1891

IRISH BEND.

LOWER LOUISIANA is a marshy, swampy level stretch of country with an imperceptible coast line. No one can tell where the solid ground ends or where the sea begins. Approaching from the Gulf of Mexico, you find your ship in muddy waters, and by and by you see here and there a speck of mud itself, emerging above the surface, and barely large enough to be noticed, and gradually as you sail northward these specks grow more numerous until they seem to coalesce and become small mud islands, and after a while these small islands grow together and you begin to realize that there are distinctly defined banks each side of the broad muddy channel through which you are sailing, intersected here and there by other channels extending in every direction. Twenty miles perhaps from the place where you first perceived indications of real mud, the land will be firm enough to sustain a few piles supporting a fisherman's cabin or pilot's hut. Ten miles further on and you may see signs of life and cultivation. The river banks have risen to a height of two or three feet above the level of the water. The whole southwestern part of the state is a network of bayous or natural canals, usually narrow and always deep. In summer they are mere channels of drainage, but in spring they are full to the top and often overflowing thus making a system of natural waterways that reach within a mile or two of every plantation with currents strong enough to carry the flat boats laden with sugar, cotton and corn to New Orleans, Brashear or the ports on the coast. Here and there the yet unfilled depressions in the soil form large but shallow lakes, that in the dry season are mere marshes. The mighty Red river empties only a part of

its stream into the Mississippi, the balance of its flow is turned, twenty miles west of that river, down the old channel of the Atchafalaya, which runs broad and deep until it passes Butte La Rose, where it spreads out into Grand Lake, a muddy sheet that, save for its low banks, reminds one of Haverstraw Bay on the Hudson. This lake contracts again at Brashear, where, increased by the waters of the Teche, it flows in one wide channel, deep enough for ocean steamers into the Mexican Gulf at Atchafalaya Bay. This is the Garden spot of our continent. The New England farmer doubts the evidence of his own senses when he sees for the first time the amazing fertility of the soil, the immensity of the flocks and herds of horses, cattle and domestic animals that this country produces and maintains.

This was the region where it was fated that the Twenty-fifth Connecticut regiment should make its spring campaign in 1863. Early in December we had taken possession of Baton Rouge on the Mississippi and had employed our time in practically learning the art of war, and we prided ourselves on our proficiency in drill and discipline. The winter had been, to us who were accustomed to our rigorous climate here, very mild, but we had begun to feel as early as the end of March, a foretaste of that terrible enervation that the coming summer was to bring to our men habituated to our bracing air of Connecticut. We were somewhat hardened to the little outdoor inconveniences of Louisiana. We didn't mind the mosquitoes, although they were ten times as big—a hundred times as hungry and a thousand times as vicious as those we raise here. We didn't mind the wood-ticks, and although we preferred not to have moccasin snakes in our tents, they would come sometimes. We had made a movement on Port Hudson early in March and the Twenty-fifth was in the lead, five miles in advance of the main army. We had built a bridge over the Bayou Montecino, and had lain on our arms all night awaiting orders to attack Port Hudson,

when Farragut's fleet attempted to pass the batteries. Only two of his ships, the Hartford and Albatross, succeeded, while the Richmond was disabled and the Mississippi was destroyed. We had engaged in a night skirmish with the enemy at Montecino, and had lost one man in that affair. We had retired from Port Hudson as rear guard of the column. Ours was the post of danger every time, and we had encountered the worst storm and waded through the deepest mud to be found on the continent and had bivouacked in a field almost as dry as the bottom of Lake Ontario.

With these experiences we felt like veterans, but we didn't then know how much we had to learn. On March 31, our regiment was transported to Donaldsonville, fifty miles below Baton Rouge, from there we marched beside Bayou Lafourche to Thibodeaux and then took the cars for Bayou Boeuf, and after a few days' halt, marched over to Brashear. We knew that something was going to be done, but didn't know what. We knew that somebody was going to be hurt, but didn't know who. We knew that some folks were going to get badly whipped, but it wasn't us. We were certain of that. Our superior officer and officers couldn't tell us anything or wouldn't tell us anything, and I have since come to the conclusion that they were very much like some of the wire pulling politicians of the present day. They didn't know themselves. It may be wisdom sometimes in war and in politics, not to let your followers know just what you intend to make them do, but it's mighty poor policy to let your enemy know it first.

On Saturday, April 11, 1863, the Twenty-fifth Connecticut, less than 500 strong, embarked on the steamer St. Mary, a New York and Galveston liner, built to carry 500 passengers at a pinch, but loaded on this occasion with 2,500.

We were crowded. We were just packed as close as the squares of hard tack in the bread barrels, closer than sardines in a box. So close that we didn't have room

to sweat. We had to hold our haversacks that contained three days' rations of sheet iron biscuit and salt pork, on our heads. The decks were covered with a solid mass of humanity. We cast off the lines and our ship slowly steamed up the Atchafalaya, now and then rubbing the banks so closely that we could grasp the branches of the magnolia and cypress that formed one green, unbroken fringe on either side.

General Emory's division of Banks' army had already moved up the west bank of the Bayou Teche, fighting its way against the fresh active troops of Dick Taylor. We were in General Cuvier Grover's division, and were expected to sail up Grand Lake and disembark at Hutchins Landing, where the Teche, by a sharp bend, comes within two miles of the lake; and on this narrow strip was the only road (as we supposed) over which an army and especially artillery and baggage wagons could pass. During Saturday night, Sunday and Sunday night we were crammed, stifled and suffocated on the steamer's deck, as she slowly felt her way up through the muddy and shallow water of Grand Lake. To have run aground would have been disastrous failure to the whole expedition. Towing astern were large flat bottomed scows, loaded with artillery and artillery men. These were indispensable when on Monday morning we found that it was impossible for our ship to approach within half a mile of the shore, and the men were ferried from the steamer to the bank, where a lively little skirmish was going on between some confederate scouts and Col. Dick Holcomb's First Louisiana. General Grover was ahead of us, smoking as usual, and in his excitement he had lighted a second cigar and was vigorously puffing and pulling at both corners of his mouth. He grasped Colonel Bissell by the hands in welcome, as the colonel leaped from the boat. No delay now, forward! a few hundred yards brought us to the woods. Our skirmishers went through and we soon had orders to follow. We halted at the open clearing on the other

side and awaited to hear from General Grover, who had gone ahead to reconnoitre. Off to the southwest we could hear the artillery firing that told us that Emory's forces were having a fierce fight with Taylor's only a few miles away. Another half mile advance, another halt and again forward. Just as the sun was going down we crossed the Teche over a drawbridge and filed into the main road and skirted the fertile plantation of Madame Porter. This stately, handsome lady, surrounded by scores of fat, happy looking and well clad slaves, stood in front of her elegant home and sadly watched us as we passed. No farm in Connecticut, however carefully supervised, could show better evidences of wise management than this. The houses, fences, graineries, fields, slave quarters and everything, were in perfect order—all were clean, whole, and systematically arranged. The fertile soil seemed to proclaim audibly to our farmer boys its readiness to give back a hundred and fifty fold for its seed and care. The shades of night were falling fast when we filed into an open plowed field and moved by the right of companies to the rear into columns. We halted, stacked arms, ate hard tack and raw pork, and rested. The ground was soft alluvial; mist came with sundown and rain came with the darkness, and the surface of the earth was soon transformed into soft, deep mud. There was no noise, no music, no laughter. Every man knew instinctively that the morrow's sun would shine upon many a corpse. Our generals had believed, and we had hoped, that as soon as Taylor would find this large force of ours suddenly occupying the road in his rear, he would submit to the inevitable and surrender, but he had not surrendered and would not surrender, and that meant a fierce engagement for us. As soon as darkness had set in, General Grover sent up rockets to apprise General Banks of our position. Sleep was impossible. Colonel Bissell and I sat on a bread box back to back, our feet in the soft mud and our clothing gradually absorbing the rain

that fell steadily upon us. The hours dragged slowly along, and before daybreak our men were aroused, made a hasty breakfast, and in the grey of the morning we set out in advance of our brigade that consisted of the Thirtieth and Twenty-fifth Connecticut, Twenty-sixth Maine and One Hundred and Fifty-ninth New York, Colonel Birge in command. We were all on foot, officers and men alike. Our horses, baggage, and impedimenta had been left at Brashear to follow the column of General Emory.

For a mile below Madame Porter's plantation the Bayou Teche (which is here about one-third as wide as the Farmington river, but deep enough for gun-boats) runs to the southeast and then turns sharply to the southwest towards Franklin, a very pretty village, some five miles below. The road following the sinuosities of the stream runs parallel to it, with a strip of a few rods in width between. We enter an immense cane field, its furrows in line with the road. On the west the field was bounded by a rail fence, beyond which arose a dense wood of magnolias, cotton wood and semi-tropical trees looking like a long green wall. Far in front arose a transverse wall like to the first, and making at its intersection a right angle. At this angle, the road entered the wood, near to the ground this forest was absolutely impenetrable to the sight, by reason of the suffocating growth of briars, vines, palmettos and underbrush. We ought to have occupied these woods the night before, and have hemmed the enemy in the open beyond. We now knew that the foe was in our immediate front. We marched down the field, the right wing deployed as skirmishers, the left wing in close battalion front following a few rods in its rear. By and by a puff of smoke from the green wall in front of us and a second or two afterwards the crack of a rifle. The fight had begun; another puff, another crack then more and more, multiplying as we approached. The bend in the road is now disclosed, the enemy's skirmishers disappeared

from our front to re-appear in greater numbers on our right. Our skirmishers were called in and we changed front forward on first company, moved down towards the wood on the right, and halting about 150 yards from the fence, we poured a volley into the enemy's ranks. The One Hundred and Fifty-ninth New York came down into line on our left, the Twenty-sixth Maine formed in our rear, the Thirteenth Conn. took position on our extreme left occupying both sides of the road. The canes of the previous year's growth were breast high in our field and our lines were parallel with the furrows. The enemy's shot rattled through the dry stalks, crackling like hail against the windows. The enemy were armed with smooth bores, every cartridge charged with a bullet and three buck shot, while our regiment was armed with Enfield rifles, and so the rebels, man for man, were giving us four shots to our one in return. For more than half an hour their volley firing didn't get our range. Although so near to us, hardly a man had been hit, while the Twenty-sixth Maine, lying on the ground in our rear, was suffering severely in killed and wounded. Col. Bissell's orders to us were to lie down and load, rise up and fire. Remember that this was thirty years ago, and in our brigade we had no fixed ammunition, no breach loaders, our rifles were muzzle loaders with paper cartridge, ramrod, percussion cap.

The regiment of to day can load and fire many times faster than we could then. We loaded and fired as fast as possible, but the enemy were giving us shot for shot and more. Our men had warmed up to their work and it was work. The enemy had an immense advantage in position, and the conviction was stealing over us that he had the advantage in numbers also. Many an anxious eye was turned back towards the road, to see the columns of our other brigades, but they were not in sight. Murmurings began to be heard all along the line at the laggardiness of our supports. Now and then a cheer from the enemy followed by an increased vol-

ume of firing told us that their numbers were being rapidly recruited by new arrivals, while our little brigade was becoming exhausted. Every soldier had long before drained the last drop from his canteen, the sun was rising high and hot, and we learned then, that there is no thirst so burning and so terrible, as that which seizes upon the soldier in battle.

Every command given by the confederate officers was as distinctly heard by us as if given in our own companies. Their lines already extended far beyond our flank and their oft repeated cheers told us how rapidly their ranks were being increased by new arrivals. Every order to us to lie down, was followed by their taunts. "Why don't you stand up, you damn Yankees, and let us shoot you." Suddenly a fresh cheer from the rebels, then the thundering roar of a field piece from the angle and in an instant from overhead came a crack, with a rain of iron fragments as a shell exploded right over our line. Another roar, crack and iron shower, and we see to our dismay two brazen guns, admirably served, trained directly upon us, pouring shell, grape and canister into our ranks, while their musketry fire grew hotter and fiercer than ever. Our men were nearing the end of their supply of ammunition. If the confederates had charged upon us at this time, they would have annihilated our brigade; wounded men were crawling to the rear where Dr. Woods with Magill and his assistants stood under their yellow hospital flag. Colonel Bissell's voice rung clear and cheerful as ever, but his face was anxious. Down into the field came Lieutenant Bradley's battery at a gallop, and in five seconds more his guns were answering the enemy's.

Up went Bissell's hat with a joyful cheer as he shouted to Lieutenant Dewey, 'Dan, there's music in the air.' Waterman was begging for permission to charge upon the enemy. 'Keep cool, Waterman, said the colonel, we will charge when Birge gives the order. Our reinforcements of artillery gave us renewed spirits,

but it was in vain to hope for victory against a better posted and overwhelming force. The cane stalks no longer sheltered us from view, the terrible hail of bullets had mowed and flattened them to the ground on our right flank, however they stood undisturbed. Hurrah! At last here comes Dwight's brigade. Far back in the field were the advancing columns of Billy Wilson's Sixth New York, the Ninety-first New York, and the Twenty-fourth Connecticut. Our men gave an answering hurrah, but close across our right flank, suddenly as if evoked by a magician's call, arose a long gray line of armed men. They had crawled unperceived, hidden by the thick, high canes, and our first intimation of their presence was a murderous volley raking our line from right to left. Bradley's battery was scampering to the rear with nine of his men dead or disabled on the ground. Fall back, shouted the colonel; our right wing was in confusion and disorder; the left wing fell back steadily, but only for a few rods.

The advancing brigade opened ranks to let us pass, and we halted and reformed in its rear, and sank exhausted on the ground, anxiously watching the fate of our gallant supporters. Ninety five of our brave boys were dead or wounded, nine-tenths of them by that terrible flank fire, and in our last five minutes on the field. The Sixth and Ninety-first New York moved down the field in battle line, but was opposed by no fire. What does it mean? That green wall that for the past two hours had been belching forth smoke, shot and shell, in one endless, deadly storm, is now silent as the grave itself. Does the enemy intend to allow them to approach so closely that every man behind the fence may mark his motion and destroy this new line by one well-directed volley?

On they went; no shot opposed them; they reached the fence, crossed it, and were in the woods so lately populous with the confederate soldiers. None remained excepting their dead and disabled. They had

disappeared like the mists before the morning sun. Their whole object now was clear; they had held us in check while their artillery and baggage had gone up a new road on the further side of the wood, and their entire army now was above both divisions of ours, leaving us far in their rear. On the field lay the lifeless body of the veteran, Captain Hayden, and young Lieutenant Dewey. Arnold and Wilson lay dead. Lieutenant Oliver had been carried from the field with a bullet in his brain, to linger for six weeks before death came to his relief. Waterman stood grim and resolute at the head of his company, with his arm bandaged and bleeding. Harkness limped painfully along, disabled by a spent bullet. John Martin fell dead at the final volley of the rebels. Old Button was carried off the field, his shoulder mangled, the arm bone splintered in the socket, and with but a few more days of life before him. Graham lay dead. Brooks, the tall young sapling, whose extraordinary height made him a conspicuous mark, had fallen, pierced by a dozen bullets. Sergeant Taft, with a shattered arm, was carried off the field by his lieutenant, Brennan. Gray, Prindle, Lawton, Holden and Carlos Bissell lay dead. Cook lay mortally wounded. Lieutenant Banning was crippled for life. Dick Rose, Goodwin, Lincoln, and I cannot name them all, were more or less severely wounded. How many died of their injuries I cannot now remember. War duties were imperative; we had no time to waste. As the New York regiments crossed the fence we were ordered to march by the flank into the road, and turned at once into the bloody angle where the enemies' murderous artillery had been stationed a few minutes before.

I cannot refrain here from making mention of one of the most gallant men who fell on that day, John H. Hunt, of Coventry. Just before we left Baton Rouge, at his request, I stood as his sponsor in the little wrecked Catholic church when Father Abbadie received him a convert of the true faith in the sacra-

ment of Baptism. A few days before the battle of Irish Bend, he showed me a letter from home with the happy tidings of the birth and baptism of a son. He had honored me from the first by asking my counsels, by relying on my advice and I loved him like a brother. It was not until hours after the battle that I heard that he was severely wounded, and I seized the first opportunity to find him and if possible to aid and comfort him. He was lying on some dirty, loose cotton waste in the sugar mill that we used as a field hospital. His side was torn open by an explosion and his sufferings were intense. It was incredible that he lived at all after his wound, yet he lingered for seven days of untold misery. I had only a moment to remain. I promised him that if spared to return home, I would carry his dying messages to his wife and child, and the first moment after returning to Connecticut, that I could leave my home, I fulfilled that promise and visited his afflicted family at Coventry.

As the enemy were leaving the woods the Thirteenth Connecticut made a gallant charge into the brigade and captured the standard that only a few days before had been presented by the ladies of Franklin to St. Mary's cannoniers. For over twenty years that silken banner adorned the wall of your own state arsenal at Hartford, and four years ago it was generously and gratuitously given back by the state of Connecticut to the survivors of that old confederate company of artillery from whose hands the gallant Thirteenth Connecticut wrested it on the 14th of April, 1863.

But the battle is not yet over.

The rebel army was hurrying away in the distance, but just beyond the woods in the open was the rebel gunboat Diana, manned by a crew that had been raised in this neighborhood, who knew every foot of the country, every turn of the Bayou, every road, cart path and foot path, every house, barn, negro, mule and chicken. Emory's force was hastening up from the south, we

held both sides of the narrow bayou on the north, and escape for the boat was impossible. The moment the head of our column entered the woods the solid shot and shell from the Diana's guns came whistling up the road. We gave them the right of way without waiting for orders; the side walk was good enough for us, then. We split into two columns, one on each side of the way, and halted while the general and staff went ahead to reconnoitre. The enemy's gunners began to shell the wood, and such a shelling. We could not return a shot. The Diana's guns were far heavier and of longer range than ours, and there we sat and waited while the tempest of solid shot, grape and canister swept through us and shells exploded over us and spitefully showered their iron fragments on our heads. We had begun this fight before sunrise. It was now 3 p. m., but seemed an age. Dust, sweat and powder smoke had begrimed every man so that we were indistinguishable from the negro slaves; our mud-soaked clothing was torn into shreds by the brambles that entangled us at every step. Bang went a terrific explosion just at the edge of the woods on our front, and a shower of leaden and iron missiles, timbers and splinters fairly sprayed up into the air and fell on every side. Then all was silent. It was the death yell of the Diana. Her crew had fought desperately to the last, then applying the torch they leaped ashore into the thicket and scampered away to join their retreating friends. It was the last hostile shot of the day.

We turned our attention to our unfortunate comrades. I obtained permission to go back to the field and bury our fallen. Two of Captain Hayden's men had already laid him, wrapped in his blanket, under the spot where he fell. Dewey's body had been taken to the field hospital in the rear. I conscripted, without orders, an old negro man, who was near by with a mule cart, and requested Hayden's men to exhume his body and remove it to the rear. We dug a trench seven feet wide in our

late battle line and laid our dead companions therein side by side, and next to them we placed the unburied men of the other regiments who had fallen in the fight. Going back to the hospital a box was made and in it we placed the body of Captain Hayden and buried it twenty-five feet south of the hospital on a line with the west wall, painted his name, rank and regiment on a wooden slab and set it firmly in the ground at the head of the grave, made a diagram of the place and sent it that night to his brother in New Orleans, that there might be no difficulty in finding the body in case his friends should wish it to be sent to his home in Windsor, there to lie among his ancestors and kinsmen. The hospital was filled with sufferers who had passed through the hands of the surgeons.

Some were dying, some had death's seal imprinted on every feature, others were mutilated, maimed for life. Some whose wounds were slight by comparison, yet they would have been regarded as serious everywhere but here. Every form of human suffering that comes from violence was there. Cots, mattresses or beds there were none. A few old sacks had been found, and appropriated to the worst injured men, but most of them had no softer bed than their blanket on the floor. Outside the building a dozen surgeons and their assistants—the hospital stewards—surrounded rude tables, and with bare arms were hurrying through their horrible but indispensable work. Around them were lying hundreds of men, weak and bleeding, gashed, mutilated and torn in body and limb, who were awaiting their turn on the operating table. It was a conglomeration of human misery, to be seen nowhere but on a battle field. Colonel Bissell, whose eye had not dimmed, whose courage had not failed, whose voice had not faltered for a single instant through that long terrible day's fight, could not bear to look upon this horrible sight and turning sorrowfully away he rejoined his sadly depleted column and marched it back to the field, where we were to

bivouac for the night, and from which we were to hasten by daylight in pursuit of the foe. And the night came on and our war wearied veterans sank to rest on the soft damp ground, and the glow worms glimmered as thickly and brightly, and the insects chirped as loudly, and the night owls hooted and the black deep waters of the Bayou flowed on as quietly as if men had met that day in fraternal love and not in deadly hate. One more blood red chapter had been added to our national history. Hundreds of loving wives in Connecticut and New York and Maine and Louisiana had begun the day with a prayer on their lips for the absent husbands, and knew not that the setting sun was looking pityingly upon their unconscious widowhood.

Thirty years have rolled away. Two generations have come into the world since that fearful day. Death has thinned the ranks of its survivors. Of five field officers I alone remain. Of our line and staff more than half have joined their comrades who fell at Irish Bend, and so, too, of our rank and file.

One of the last to leave us was our great-hearted, brave colonel, who was laid to rest but a few days ago in Cedar Hill. His epitaph is written in golden letters in the hearts of the men who followed him, in the hearts of the poor whose sufferings he relieved. We hope, we pray, that his name is written in the book of life. Honor to the

