Escape from Camp Ford!

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I’m sure all of you are very aware of Camp Ford, so no need to explain that. The first prisoners arrived in late August, 1863, with the stockade walls going up in November.
Before long, prisoners started thinking about escaping. Lt. Col. Charles C. Nott of the 176th New York Infantry, wrote:

The difficulty of passing the stockade and guard was trivial; the difficulties of crossing the surrounding country were not insurmountable; . . . To look over the wide extent of country with its sparse population, its scattered plantations, its remote towns, and talk of pursuing prisoners would seem as idle as searching for needles in a haystack. But every road was watched, every river was guarded. Every man or woman or boy who was not a secret Unionist was in effect a Confederate patrol; the entire State was one great detective police, constantly pursuing prisoners, refugees and slaves.

Henry C. Thompson of the 16th Indiana Infantry, wrote:

Of the numbers constantly getting out of the prison, it is safe to say that not over one in sixty over came [sic] all the dangers from dogs, rebels, swift deep rivers, swamps and, worse of all, hunger. They were compelled to travel at night and hide in the day time; they were ignorant of the geography of the country . . . their very appearance betrayed them and after a few days of wandering, bewildered and exhausted by hunger, they were compelled to barter for corn bread, or were overtaken by men and bloodhounds who were constantly on their track.

William E. Biddison, Co. F, 18th Iowa wrote:

We knew that Fort Smith lay 300 or 400 miles to the north, and that most of the distance was through an uninhabited wilderness; that the white inhabitants were hostile and that the Indians of the Territory were unfriendly; that the country north of Red river was mountainous; that most of the journey must be made at night with no guide but the stars and that food would be difficult to obtain. Beyond this we had but little knowledge of the country. But the danger and uncertainty was counter balanced by the intense longing to be once more free and among friends.

With the odds so heavily against success, some planning beyond just getting out of the stockade was necessary. First, how should you pick your comrades for this journey? Almost all escapes were only three or four men, although two that I found included five that traveled together. Usually the men were from the same regiment, often the same company and they knew each other well. They should all be in reasonably good health. At least one man should be skilled in woodcraft-- he could tell direction even on a dark night when the North star couldn’t be seen. He could deal with wild animals who were either a threat or a food
source, and he could get the others across rivers and through swamps. Someone who couldn’t swim was a real problem, for more than one group. Another member of the group should be a consummate liar, who could read a face and immediately come up with a believable story. Someone who could forge paperwork was an asset. Others should be steady and not panic in tight situations.

Samuel A. Swiggett of the 26th Iowa Infantry, described his group this way: “We discussed the situation, and organized for the coming campaign by electing Rummel as guide of the expedition, Miller as man of all work and myself as minister plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinary for all cases requiring diplomacy.” Or, in other words, chief liar, and he was a master at it.

John A. Bering of the 48th Ohio wasn’t far behind:
I commenced by asking: "How far is it to Washington? [Arkansas]" I thought there was a town in that vicinity by that name. One of them replied: "It is about thirteen miles down to Washington." I knew from my map where I was, so I began to have more confidence. I then told them that I belonged to a Texas regiment, at Arkadelphia, Arkansas, and that my mother, who lived in Henderson, Texas, and was a widow, had sent for me to come home on business, and that as I could not get a furlough, I had determined to go home on my own responsibility, attend to my affairs, and then return to my regiment. If they wished, they could have me arrested as a deserter, and sent back, but I would get home some time. Besides, my captain told me that if I hurried back, there would be nothing said about it. I awaited anxiously to see what effect my story would have on them. It seemed to take very well. . . . They now asked me the news in camp. I made up a batch of stories for the occasion, but told them they were mere camp rumors, and that you could not believe anything you heard these days. So you had two or three men you could trust and depend on. What else did you need?

Most men needed to exchange their blue uniform jackets, if they still had them, for something in Confederate butternut or gray that would allow them to pass as Southern soldiers on furlough. Luckily, some of the guards were usually willing to make such a swap, not caring to examine motives too closely. Good shoes were underrated, and usually not mentioned until they gave out along the way. There were a few prisoners who left Camp Ford barefooted, but they didn’t make it very far. Many escapees mentioned East Texas briers and cactus, Louisiana cane shoots, and Arkansas sharp rocks.

Horace B. Little of the 43rd Indiana wanted the best possible chance of success:

Finally I asked some of the recaptured men how it was that they did not succeed after getting outside the stockade. They all said it was on account of having to go to farm houses to get something to eat. . . . When hunger drove him to a farm house he was reported and the bloodhounds were put on his trail. I resolved that if ever I succeeded in getting outside I would not be caught that way. It was three or four hundred miles to our lines, but I believed I could manage without going to a house for food. The lesson learned by questioning the returned prisoners saved me when I did escape.

It would be very difficult to save up enough food to make it all of the way to federal lines on the scant rations provided at Camp Ford, but they at least needed enough for the first few nights of fast and hard travel to get beyond the camp’s bloodhounds. Some of the men sold their uniform buttons and others sold crafts to
the guards and then purchased additional food such as flour to make their own hard tack. The primary meat at Camp Ford was beef, which they made into jerky.

The Henderson-Jones-Parker outfit secured one tin cup, one canteen, and two case-knives. They managed to get from the hospital two ounces of spirits of turpentine, in which they mixed red pepper. This was to rub on their feet, to destroy their scent for the dogs.

Bering described his preparations as: “Each one had a butternut suit and a haversack, and between us, one case-knife, one tin cup, one tin plate, for parching corn, one box of matches, pencil and paper, to keep a diary of our travels. Each of us also had a map of Texas and Arkansas, which we had copied” and “by the advice of a slave, we procured two large pieces of soap, to rub our feet with, if the hounds should get on our track.”

When should the escapes be made? Several things needed to be taken into consideration.

Col. Nott wrote:

When the minds of many men are given wholly to one subject, it is incredible how many expedients they can devise. Yet no expedient could be devised to comply with one condition which the calmer judgments imposed, and which was thus allegorically expressed by one of our friends in the guard, “When General Green spreads his tents, there will be plenty of good recruits join him;” which meant, “You had better wait till the leaves are out.”

Another consideration on timing was finding food along the way. Stephen Jex of the 23rd Wisconsin wrote: “We had to wait till corn was fit to eat, in order to be sure of getting food. As soon therefore as the corn was of proper age a lot of us made preparations for leaving.”

The men usually waited for a very dark night, and if it was raining so much the better to wash away their scent so the bloodhounds couldn’t follow them. However, once they were away from the stockade, they preferred a clear sky so they could see the north star, and too much rain flooded the river bottoms, making travel dangerous.

Benjamin F. Gordon, 36th Iowa, recalled: “We remained at the hospital till after dark, when it commenced to rain, and then struck for the woods, taking a northeast course as near as we could judge by the lay of the country in so dark a night. It cleared off by and by and we discovered the North star, which was our guide for the twenty-one nights we were together in the woods.”

In order to not be discovered missing in the next Camp Ford roll call, which would mean immediately calling out the dogs, escapees needed dependable men who stayed behind and answered for them.
A member of the 46th Indiana wrote:

“It was seldom the authorities discovered the absence, of a man, escaping, until his friends made it known, or he was re-captured. Keeping his escape a secret, gave him a start of the hounds and cavalry, and, equal to that in general interest, it gave the camp a ration extra.”

Just going by the escape accounts that I’ve so far found published, I have about 133 names of prisoners who got outside the stockade. Sixty-four of those were successful, and 71 were caught and brought back, but that’s a misleading number because several that were recaptured would try again and fail, and maybe try again and succeed. Capt. John H. Reed of the Third Missouri Cavalry tried four or five times before he made it to Little Rock.
The Yankee prisoners were pretty ingenious in their methods to get out. Some of the earliest prisoners were from the Navy, captured on the coast.

Capt. C. P. Bragg, US Navy joked:

The determination of the rebel Government to exchange no blue-jackets had sharpened their wits, with practical results; they became deeply interested in the enlargement of the cemetery to such a degree, indeed, that jack became a professional mourner. Did a poor soldier drop off this afternoon, Jack was sure to know it, and, with long face and subdued demeanor, to be on hand at the “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” ceremony; but it was observed that on returning to camp Jack was a new being.

The next morning at roll-call Corpl’l Roe, of Co. Q, 325th R. I. Rebellion Crushers, of Gen. Banks’s Last Rose of Summer Expedition, in regulation rags and tatters reported “here” all right, but over in the other line poor Jack had closed his record in this part of the country, and the place that knew him would “know him no more.”

Assistant Engineer Robert W. Mars, of the U. S. S. Diana, took advantage of a last minute death in a regiment about to be exchanged.

One of the command of Teake [Leake] died the night before the list was to be made up and Mr. Mars disguised himself so that his own mess-mate did not know him and answered to the name of “Chris. Bolenger” and marched out. [He made it all of the way to Red River Landing undetected.] [But] As he passed into the Union lines, swinging his old slouched hat, a
Confederate officer galloped forward stating that Engineer Mars had escaped and was among the prisoners, but too late, for Mars was under the protection of the United States.

Alexander J. Swanger, 120th Ohio, visited Camp Ford thirty years later, and he talked to a former guard who was among those who removed the bodies from the temporary cemetery for reinterment at Alexandria, Louisiana.

He informed me that . . . In removing the bodies two of the coffins or boxes were found to contain nothing but logs of wood. He remarked that it had always been a mystery to him why those logs had been interred instead of bodies, and asked me if I could explain it. Fortunately I was in full possession of the information required, and soon satisfied his curiosity. I presume many of the survivors of the old prison will remember, with me, why we buried those logs, while the corpses they represented were making a lively effort to reach God’s country and the shelter of the Stars and Stripes.

A relatively easy way to get back to federal lines was to escape when another group of prisoners was on the way to exchange. Then just blend in with the rest, slipping off during roll call, then slipping back in when it was time to retake the march or when one of the prisoners died. This could confuse the paroling officer. William Soden of the 23rd Wisconsin wrote in to the National Tribune:

The paroling officer was a shrewd fellow. When he came back after taking the squad thru in February he said he had always thought himself quite smart . . . “but,” he said, “you Yanks beat me. When I left here I had 1,000 men, no more and no less, . . . Going down the river four of them died, and I saw them buried, but when I called the roll at the exchange every man was there and answered to his name!” What he did not know was that the meal wagon came into the stockade twice that night to bring grub for the men that were going, and when it went out each time two men lay on the reach and we went out with it. They knew where the first stopping place was at Sabine River, and went there and hid in the brush till the squad came, then fell in with them and went along. When the men died they got their names, and answered to them when they were called at the exchange.

The Dix–Hill Cartel was the first official system for exchanging prisoners during the Civil War. The prisoners at Camp Ford, however, devised a different sort of “cart-el.” Samuel Swiggett, possibly the camp’s best story teller, described it this way:

In policing our enclosure they used a dump cart, which would drive in, be filled with leaves and other litter lying around and then be taken to a ravine outside and dumped.
We conceived the idea of using the cart as a means of escape, and forthwith set about carrying out the scheme. . . . Selecting a favorable opportunity, Major McCauley and Captain Armstrong were laid in the cart and covered with leaves. The major’s legs were too long, and, in drawing them within the limits of space allowed, his knees reared themselves so high that, when we had covered them as well as we could, there was very little covering on top. The captain was inclined to be corpulent and was full-blooded, so that, when the leaves covered him, he breathed heavily, and a close observer could notice a regular upheaving of the mass of leaves. We hoped for the best, however, and watched the progress of events with keen interest.

The cart finally started for the exit, and several of us made our way to a good point of observation.

By the time the vehicle had reached the gate the jolting over the rough ground, and the captain’s breathing, had settled the leaves until, like the ostrich, the occupants felt secure with their heads covered, but were exposing telltale signs of their presence. McCauley’s knees appeared above the leaves like mountain peaks above the timber, while the captain’s stomach just showed, like the back of a porpoise above the water as he plunges.

An officer at the gate surveyed the cart, and we expected to see our friends hauled out, but he only smiled grimly and said not a word, while the cart proceeded on its way to the ravine.

We looked at each other in astonishment, [but] . . . Our astonishment was soon changed to amusement as the officer spurred his horse toward the cart, and then stood quietly by, with a smile on his face, as the driver backed up to the ravine and prepared to dump the cart. A creak, a rush, a cloud of leaves and dust, a glimpse of two tumbling figures, and we saw our friends sitting in the bottom of the ravine, looking up wonderingly at the smiling officer on the bank, who said to them:

“Well, boys, where are you going?”

“To Camp Ford,” replied Armstrong; “will you be kind enough to show us the way?”

“Certainly; will you ride or walk?” said the officer, pointing to the waiting cart and the grinning driver.

“Thank you, but we’ll walk if it is not too far,” was the answer, and the two men limped back to the stockade . . .
Some of the Confederate guards could be persuaded to look the other way while prisoners escaped, either through sympathy, being secret Unionists, or outright bribery. A member of the 46th Indiana recalled that “Hundreds, who had money, bribed the guards to connive at their escape. Sometimes as many as twenty, of a night. The market price for such favors, was five dollars in greenbacks. These contracts were made with men who professed Union sentiments, and would, for money, do the prisoners any favor in their power, when their officers were not about.” It cost Samuel Swiggett $150 in Confederate money to slip out. The question always was, would the guard keep up his end of the deal. John Bering of the 48th Ohio said “I felt rather uncomfortable, when I reflected upon the idea of trusting myself in a rebel's hands. I was afraid of treachery, as they had, on several occasions, accepted bribes to let prisoners out, and when they had their pay, they would fire on those whose bribes they had taken.”

The most exciting, but not the most successful means of escaping were the tunnels, and Camp Ford had quite a few at least started between the spring of 1864 and the spring of 1865.

The first was precisely laid out using geometry to determine grade and direction. Col. Charles Nott was instrumental in the design and construction:

A great deal of earth comes out of such a hole. It was estimated that we brought out two cart loads a day. For the first day or two our plan was simply to carry it from the cabin after dark. Now this might escape notice, but if it once attracted observation, and that observation should continue from night to night, detection was certain. The boldest course is always the safest, and therefore it was determined that all the earth should be carried out in broad daylight. Accordingly a number of officers were detailed for this work. They never went for a
bucket of water without filling the bucket with earth; none carried out a bag or basket empty. Little by little, the contents of the tunnel were distributed around the camp. Some was thrown in the paths and trampled down—some in the ravine, and covered with ashes, and some was used to bank up “shebangs.” It was scattered so perfectly that many of our own number were at a loss to know what had become of it.

The night of the fifteenth of April [1864] would be the first on which the moon would rise late enough for a sufficient number of men to pass out . . . On the ninth, news arrived that a great battle had begun at Mansfield. On the tenth, rumors came, saying that the Confederate General had possessed sufficient courage to move forward and strike our invading army. On the eleventh, we heard that he had struck it in detail, routing it and driving it back toward Alexandria. On the thirteenth, Colonel Allen received orders to prepare for four thousand new prisoners. On the fifteenth, the stockade was moved back six hundred feet, and our unfortunate tunnel left high and dry in the middle of this new enclosure.
Lindsey Zollars of the 106th Illinois described another tunnel project:

I knew of only two tunnels to the outside that were started. Only one of these was completed. ... A tunnel had to be started in a shanty or in the back of some cave. . . . We could work only on the darkest nights. Each bit of clay from the tunnel had to be buried under the sand. We started in Sergeant Arnold’s hut about 50 or 60 feet from the stockade wall. First we dug down six feet, and then tunneled towards the wall, hoping to surface on the outside under a brush pile about 75 feet from the wall. We had to work naked with only a bowie knife to dig with. The clay was carried out in a one gallon haversack and buried. As the digging progressed it became more and more difficult. The tunnel was just large enough to admit one man at a time, by squirming along like a worm. The digger worked the clay behind him with his hands and feet. The next man filled the haversack attached to a string. The man at the entrance pulled the haversack out and buried its contents. As the tunnel got larger more and more men had to get into the hole to pass the haversack back by its short string. This was exhausting [sic] work, and on a hot night it was torture. The digger, of course, got the least supply of air. . . . it took every bit of a man’s courage to go into that hole. When the tunnel was about 80 feet long, suffocation was the worst danger. If the digger should faint or lose consciousness the man back of him would hardly have the strength to get him out alive in those narrow confines. Cave-ins were a menace. Discovery by the guards on emerging was always a big chance, but the worst of all was discovery while working. The guards knew there was a tunnel somewhere and
Commandant McErcheron [sic] had boasted that he would put a guard over it and fill up any tunnel found immediately, even though it contained a hundred men.

Relatively few men succeeded in reaching federal lines by using tunnels.

One of the largest single escape attempts occurred in the latter part of March, 1864, before the Red River Campaign. Fifteen officers decided to escape by shifting a post in the stockade wall. The other prisoners provided a cover, as described by Col. Nott:

A gay party assembled in the “shebang” nearest to the southern side of the stockade. They had a fiddle and banjoes and castanets, and all the vocal minstrelsy of the camp. They roared Irish songs, and danced negro break-downs,. . . Down at the farther corner of the enclosure, where all was gloom and quiet, two men crawled on the ground to the stockade. They were about thirty feet apart, and a rope lay between them. The sentry on the outside heard the merriment in the “shebang,” and as all was quiet on his beat, he walked up to look at the Yankee’s fun. He passed the two men. The second twitched the rope; the first quickly rose, and dug with all his might. A few minutes, and the hole was deep enough to allow a post of the stockade to be canted over, so as to leave a narrow aperture between it and its neighbor. The man laid down his spade, signalled [sic] to some one behind him, and began to squeeze himself through the opening. Fourteen others rose from the ground, and one by one, trembling with impatient eagerness, pressed through and followed him. They crossed the sentries’ path, ran up a little hill that fronted the stockade, and disappeared beneath the trees beyond. The second of the two men still lay upon the ground. The last of the fifteen was to have twitched the rope, and this man was to have replaced the post. But who, at such a time, ever looked behind to see if he were last? The signal was not given! Within the “shebang” still rose the racket, and still the sentry stood grinning at the Yankee antics. But from the other direction came the tramp of the next guard-relief! “The shifted post was discovered, a pack of tracking dogs was brought in from Tyler, and all but two were brought back to Camp Ford within the week.
The use of forged passes, usually to the hospital, was probably the most successful method of getting outside the stockade walls, while the use of forged Confederate furloughs was one of the best ways to stay out of Camp Ford.

Samuel Swiggett, in his second escape attempt, was able to take a look at the pass of a recovering prisoner.

Captain Fee was in the hospital at the time, just recovering from an attack of illness, and the day before we were ready to start he came in to see us, on a pass. As we were talking together, I asked to see his pass, . . . I was a very good imitator of handwriting, although I had never been guilty of using my gift for unlawful purposes, and, as I read this pass, the manner of our escape was settled, all being fair in war. After some little effort on my part, Rummel, Miller and myself were each provided with a pass similar to the one on which Fee had been admitted to the stockade.

The passes worked, and the group was able to get within 50 miles of Little Rock before being recaptured and brought back. After that Swiggett was the Camp Ford master forger.

A man would come to me for the means of escape, or, rather, the means of avoiding recapture after escape. I would make out a written application from him to his captain for a leave of ten, twenty or thirty days, in which was stated the necessity for his going home to Upshur county, Texas, to procure clothing, which all Confederate soldiers then needed. On the back of this application would appear the approval of his captain, colonel and brigade commander, as well
as the final and effective endorsement of Kirby Smith's adjutant, General Boggs, all the endorsements being made by me, except that of General Boggs, which was completely counterfeited by the adjutant of the 77th Ohio. Thus being fortified with legal authority to return to his regiment on an expired furlough, the prisoner would endeavor to appear as a dutiful Confederate soldier going to the front.

Once beyond the walls, with friends inside answering roll call for the escapees, the next challenge was getting outside the reach of the camp's pack of bloodhounds. Every soldier who wrote about his experiences at Camp Ford, wrote bitterly about the tracking dogs. From Lindsey Zollars: “About 8 o’clock every morning two men on a mule, followed by packs of 10 or 12 bloodhounds, circled the outside of the stockade to pick up the scent of any prisoners that might have escaped. These hounds were found throughout the South and had been used to catch escaping negro slaves.”

Charles Nott wrote:

The Confederates possessed in them “pursuing angels,” whose powers exceeded those of men. If you buried yourself in the earth, they dug you out. If you climbed a tree, they came and stood at the foot. If you plunged into trackless wilds, they followed you. If you threw yourself into a stream, and threaded its windings for miles, they passed tirelessly up and down its bank, until they came to the spot where you had left it. As every means that ingenuity could devise failed, and as prisoner after prisoner who tried them was recaptured, there gradually grew up, in our minds, a feeling that to be hunted by these brutes was like being pursued by
dreadful phantoms, such as we read of in old stories, which no mortal power could outstrip or elude, if their insatiate chase once began.

A Confederate reported from Tyler to the Galveston newspaper,

“The Yankees who recently made their escape, and were recaptured by the dogs, are very bitter in their denunciations of poor Tray. Some of them swear that after the war is over, they intend to raise dogs just to kill. The dogs used here are nothing but common fox hounds, yet it is truly wonderful how they will strike a trail and follow it—five or six of them are worth more than one hundred soldiers, to catch runaway Yankees or deserters with, and this is another improvement developed by the war. The time will come when every Sheriff will have his pack of hounds, kept by the county, expressly for the purpose of capturing evil-doers.”

Once out of the stockade and beyond the immediate reach of the Camp Ford guards and bloodhounds, the escapees struck out for federal lines, faced with about a month, give or take, of hard travel. I found two that made it to Sabine Pass, four that made it to the mouth of the Red River, usually by mixing in with an exchange group, six went to Natchez, and 64 headed to Arkansas, sometimes accidently via Indian Territory. Of those, three were headed to Pine Bluff, eleven to Fort Smith, and 47 to Little Rock, whether they made it the full way or not. To head east from Camp Ford was uncomfortably close to Confederate headquarters at Shreveport, while the route north was largely through undeveloped country with fewer patrols.
Only Greene and Whitsett, heading toward Natchez, had the benefit of a little pocket compass, given to them by Lt. Henry C. Adams who remarked “There, pard, don’t say that I never gave you anything.” It would get them through the Louisiana swamps and forests.

All escapees would eventually have to cross the Sabine River, and nearly all would have to cross the Red River. Sometimes those streams were in flood stage, requiring them to either build a raft, steal a boat or canoe, or chance a ferry. With no tools besides a knife, rafts sometimes broke up midstream. Men who could not swim clung to logs pushed along by their comrades.

Between Tyler and Henderson Samuel Dill and his group was “startled by a deep growl and the rustling of brush; we halted for a moment, not knowing whether to advance or retreat, when we saw a large bear on our left making for us; it was then “Forward run” and the way we got over the ground must have astonished Mr. Bear.” On the other side of Henderson “Again we had to run from a bear; although we were almost exhausted yet we dared not sit down to rest for fear of wild animals, especially panthers; . . . we had lain but a short time, when I happened to look up and saw a large wolf within a few feet of us, I struck at him with my cane when he left and we thought it about time to leave also. “ Flemming also “ran almost onto a big black bear in Sabine river bottoms. He showed his teeth, and, as we had no weapons except one old dull butcher knife, we rapidly cut a circuit around him.” In the Ozarks men ran into “bears, panthers, wolves, [and] catamounts.”

After the food prepared while in Camp Ford ran out, the escapees had to find other sources. Horace Little’s group spotted a squirrel that ran into a hole in the tree and grabbed it. “We did not find a place where
we could cook it, so we decided to eat it raw. It was very good and we wished we had another one.” John Moss’s group had “nothing to eat but acorns, grapes, and fruits.” R. H. Flemming’s squad “saw a hawk catch a chicken and convey it to the woods near us, and we frightened him suddenly away and took possession. ... We found at times wild grapes and a berry called the huckleberry which furnished considerable nourishment and helped sustain life when more substantial food could not be had.” George Martin’s group came across a spring where a skunk was drinking. “Jones picked up a rock and killed it. It was instantly skinned, and there being one match in the party they soon had a fire, and prepared a luscious repast. ... It tasted very well, making a satisfactory meal. They laid down to sleep, and when they awoke in the afternoon, perspiring under a blistering sun, the odor of the animal seemed to come from every pore of their skins.” In some areas water was scarce. Benjamin Gordon told the National Tribune that “We suffered greatly from thirst. Some warm days, in the morning, we would lick the leaves on the bushes, and one day I got down and licked the mud where two wild hogs had been lying.”

Eventually all groups gave in to the need to ask for food. If they could, they approached slaves, who were nearly always willing to share whatever they had with the federal soldiers. According to Swiggett, “The interest of the negroes in us was very great, and they could not do enough for us.” Sometimes, however, it took convincing. When Samuel Dill entered a slave cabin on the lower Sabine,

Mr. Wright was trying to convince them that he was a Yankee, but without effect, and all we could say did not make any impression, I had a photograph of myself in uniform which partially convinced them; I then showed them one of my little girl, she laughed and said, “We know you
are Yankees now, we never saw a southern child as fat as this.” They gave us some corn bread
and bacon . . .

As much as anything, the escape accounts I consulted confirmed the existence of pockets of Unionists
in Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. The closest were near Mount Pleasant, where a cautious farmer hesitated
to help because he had already spent three months in jail after expressing his opinions to a rebel posing as a
Unionist. Once in Arkansas there was a virtual “underground railroad” to assist them—“We got acquainted
with what we called a mountain fed, or in other words an Arkansas union man, that lived when at home in the
Ozark mountains; from him we got directions to three union men directly on our route. The first of these
being his brother-in-law....” But the mountains also harbored bands of ruthless bushwhackers who boasted
“that they had killed and scalped every Kansan and Arkansan who had fallen into their hands, and that since
the 1st of April they had killed sixty Federals. Here Henderson concluded it was safer to be an Iowa soldier
than a Kansan... So from this on he was a member of the Eighteenth Iowa. Parker and Jones likewise
belonged to the First Indiana cavalry.”

Those escapees traveling through Louisiana found “Union sentiment strong and outspoken” in
Catahoula parish. One man entertained Whitsett and Greene and “directed them to another man who could
be trusted, a day’s journey further on. The latter took them to a refugee camp in Cataloula parish, and they
were passed from one camp to another, and finally through the rebel pickets to Natchez. They saw three of
these refugee camps, each about one hundred strong—all armed, and swearing they would resist conscription
to the bitter end.”

Eventually, most of the escapees were recaptured, often through some slip up in a cover story. They
were usually taken to the nearest Confederate post where they might stay for a while, and then they were
marched back to Camp Ford.

Their treatment by the Confederate commandants varied greatly according to the individual. In early
July of 1864, Lt. Col. J. P. Border, frustrated with the escapes, posted a general order stating that “Hereafter
any Fed prisoner being detected in trying to make his escape from the prison either in the act or after he has
made his escape will be shot by the one capturing him.” I found no soldiers’ names that had been shot for
escaping, but one prisoner said he knew of two men found dead in the woods. Lindsey Zollars explained:

Tying up by the thumbs: the prisoner [had] cords attached to the thumbs and the arms pulled
up until the offender’s toes were barely supporting his weight. The cords were then made fast
above his head. When the arms were pulled up in front the man could hold out for some time,
but when the arms were pulled up from the rear to relax or let your weight down suddenly
meant sprained or possibly dislocated shoulders. In the latter position a man soon lost consciousness, but not before pleading and begging the guards to shoot him.

The next worst punishment was to be handcuffed and placed in the guardhouse. For every louse, flea or crab in the whole camp there must have been ten in the guardhouse. After a man had been in that place for 10 days, handcuffed so he could not remove his clothes, if not pretty badly harmed bodily, was almost a wreck mentally.

Second in severity in punishment was to be made to stand on a stump for ten hours a day in the sun with the guard standing close by to jab the prisoner with a bayonet if he tried to move from a standing position.

Lt. Gorman, who failed at the new cart-el, refused to promise not to try to escape again, so he was added to the group being transferred to Camp Groce, almost a death sentence. If a tunnel was found, the men were compelled to fill it up and then were made to grub up stumps and carry them for 2 hours on their shoulders and then made them to stand on them for 2 hours” or more. At the very least those recaptured lost their places in the exchange process and were told they would not be released until the war was over.

Confederate frustrations boiled over by the spring of 1865. Prisoners were “put in irons and dungeons and threatened with hanging if [they] did not tell how they got out.” The dungeon was the Tyler jail. “[Albert C.] Hutchinson [15th Maine], recaptured near Red River, was one of fifteen sent there.

The cell or dungeon into which we were thrust was in the corner of the building and partly underground. It was about 10 by 12 feet in size, with a narrow slit, 2 feet wide and 6
inches high, so near the ceiling that we could not see out of it. . . The “door” was about 2 by 3 feet in size, so close to the floor that it was necessary to get down on one’s hands and knees to enter. Inside this cell was an iron cage, 6 feet square, set up on blocks about a foot from the floor with a door so that it could be locked if necessary. . . In that miserable hell we found 10 of our comrades who had been sent there for attempting to escape. . . There we stayed for 27 days, those surviving only being released due to the end of the war.

The lucky successful escapees faced their most dangerous miles at the ends of their journeys. Confederate patrols prowled the edges of federally occupied areas. The prisoners, dressed in gray as a disguise, ran the risk of being shot by their friends. As one group from the 56th Ohio neared Little Rock they barely escaped being killed by our soldiers, as some of them had been bushwhacked by the rebels about the time of their arrival, and their gray clothes made things look suspicious. For a time they were determined to hang them whether or not, but fortunately Captain Roberts’ comrade was recognized by some old friends whom he had served with in the past. All in all they had a most desperate experience.

Once identified and accepted as federal soldiers escaped from Camp Ford, their happy reception was immediate and generous. But what the men valued the most was seeing the American flag. Robert Burke, 67th Indiana, arrived with his fellow escapees opposite Natchez.
The next morning we woke to find ourselves beneath the folds of the old flag. With bared heads we took it in our arms and passionately kissed its dear old stripes and stars. At that moment it meant to us unutterable happiness and unspeakable joy. It meant our homes, our friends and our loved ones there, it meant liberty and our country, and all that we held dearest, and loved best and God save us, may it never mean less!

I. A. Packard, 32d Iowa, and his partner walked into Little Rock.

At last we came in sight of the glorious old stars and stripes. Happy moment, we had often speculated on what our feelings would be when we saw the flag of our country again. We thought we should feel like shouting for joy; how different from reality. Neither one of us could speak; our emotions were too deep for words, we grasped each others hands in silence and thanked God in our hearts that our long imprisonment was ended. . . . I think my readers would have laughed if they could have seen us; ragged, dirty, and with an old hat tied on my feet, in lieu of shoes; but with all as proud and happy as ever king on throne. We had received the grateful news on first entering our lines that the war was over; Lee had surrendered. No more fighting for us, we were going home.

Newest book discussing digging a tunnel at Camp Ford:
Escape from Camp Ford: Selected Free Online Sources


Nott, Charles C. *Sketches in Prison Camps; a Continuation of Sketches in the War.* New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1865.  [https://archive.org/details/sketcheinprison00nott/page/n7/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/sketcheinprison00nott/page/n7/mode/2up)
