

Whatever Happened to ... Diaries and Letters

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History is defined as, among other explanations, a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events. The first definition of an event in my dictionary is "something that happens." In that light, as town historian, I feel that most events in our town are worth the time spent taken to record them. Whether exciting national or global events or seemingly insignificant day-to-day life, every happening deserves to be recorded. In support of that statement, I submit the following written in the past by people from our town; two people who although years apart in age, lived in homes that are within a few short miles of each other.

First up is an excerpt from a letter from Chandler Harrison, a young Civil War soldier. He had volunteered for service and was at *Camp Hubard, Near Tibadeaus*. [Camp Hubbard, Thibodaux, La] This particular letter was one written to his cousin, Daniel E. Jagger of Palmyra.

August 1862 we have got our Tents once more we received them the 8 of this month they are new ones, those that we left at Brashear were taken by the Rebs it seems good to have tents to sleep in and soft Bread to eat after sleeping on the ground and eating hard Tacks for long months...I send you a specimen of such money as uncle Sam gives us.

Unfortunately at this time, I am not privy to any more information from young Harrison. Apparently, however, his words affected his cousin deeply as Jagger tried to enlist before he was 16 years old - and succeeded. In a letter Jagger wrote to his mother dated February 13, 1863, we learned that Harrison was killed during the short period of time between these two letters. Jagger's letter reads in part:

To day has been a very sad day I received your letter last night stating the death of Chandler. Poor boy no one but a soldier knows how he felt and what it is for one to think of home and cannot get there it has cast a perfect gloom over me, it causes me to feel how needful it is to be prepared to die... I would like very much to see the letter which he wrote and if you can get it, send it to me ... I have read the letter over time and again and every time it makes me feel as if I must leave here [Fort Gaines] and go and fight until this cruel war and rebellion is crushed and then what is left can get home and enjoy the remainder of life in peace..."

In young Jagger's diary we hear of the exciting, interesting, thought-provoking, challenging, boring, depressing and deadly everyday happenings in the life typical of a Civil War soldier. Some entries follow:

Saturday, January 2, 1864 we had a sudden change last night it was the coldest night we have had this winter two of our gards froze to death in the afternoon. We had a row an attack on the sutters shop [a sutler is defined as a provisioner to an army post often established in a shop on the post] several were sent to the gard house one man attempted to run the gard and was shot through the breast, no hopes of his recovery.

Sunday, January 3, 1864...it was a beautiful day but I couldn't enjoy it we had some bad port for breakfast..the pork worked very bad on all the boys.

Tuesday, January 5, 1864...we were all routed out to n other Barrack where we find no bunk nothing to slppe on but the dirty floor we have all sorts of luck.

Saturday, January 9, 1864 fine day a man was shot yesterday at Barracks No. 1 he saw his wife coming to see him and ran to meet her he went a little over the line and was about to shake hands when the gard shot him through the head killing him instantly. We leave this afternoon to join our Regiments.

The following entries are also included, and illustrate the everydayness involved in Jagger's military life.

I feel quite weary after handeling the pick and shovel all day we have to work six hours a day...we marched eight miles through mud three inches deep, all clay...we drill about an hour and a half in the forenoon and the same in the afternoon...

Saturday is the bizzy day of the Week a certain number are detailed to scrub and clean the Barracks in the forenoon and afternoon we have to scour up our guns and brass ready for inspection Sunday morning...we have been on drill this morning we drilled the longest of any time yet and are quite tired...

Thursday, February 18, 1864 David came down with the measles he is pretty sick...

Friday, February 19, 1864 I sat up with Dave last night he is about the same this morning...

Saturday, February 20, 1864 I do not feel well today I cought cold last night...I have got the worse coff I ever had. Dave is getting better...

Sunday, February 21, 1864 I woke up this morning after very little sleep during the night and found myself all broken out with the measles...

Wednesday, February 24, 1864...the Company have gone to Batallion drill. I wish I was with them but here I must lay and sweat...

Then his life and that of his family was changed forever:

Tuesday, June 7, 1864 the pickets and skirmishers are firing again the bullets fly over us quite sharp last night a flag of truce was raised by the Johnnies and all firing ceased until 8 o'clock for the purpose of burying the dead 75 men of our Co have gone out on picket...

Wednesday, June 8, 1864 the remaining part of our Co were ordered on the left of Co. D and moved into the next rifle pit.

That was the last entry he ever wrote.

The following was enclosed with Jagger's diary in a note from Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Reeves of Lyons:

Diary of Stephen Reeves June 8, 1864 Lay all day in a sentry pit along with Elias Pattes balls from sharp shooters fly close around us. Daniel Jagger wounded through the lungs.

Then in the List of Soldiers—Wayne County Military Record—Daniel E. Jagger is listed as "died of wounds received at Cold Harbor June 7, 1864; shot while picking up a fallen comrade." There is a little discrepancy in the dates, but it is not an issue here.

Mrs. Olive Woodworth of Hogback Hill Rd. describes an entirely different way of life during the pre-Depression years of 1925-1929. This diary was written in an old ledger that was uncovered in the contents of her former home at the time it was sold. (The cobblestone was featured in the Nov. 29, 2000 issue of this newspaper.) Although at first glance the subject matter of the entries seems quite limited and even downright boring, when studied, the diary alludes to a way of life that no one is likely to experience again. It tells about the everyday events in the simple, unobtrusive, friendly, sharing yet strangely paradoxical life of a local farming family.

She wrote about her everyday chores such as churning (butter) and baking; about "washing" (laundry), ironing, mending and helping with the farm work. She did so in short concise statements often only one or two words long. Some typical entries are:

Tues. Apr. 6 (1926) Snowing. Mrs. Farnsworth telephoned that Mr. Walden died at five o'clock this morning Will here repairing tractor. New tires and tubes came. B. (Beryl) went to call on Mrs. Reeves. Havert moved...Fri. Aug. 19 (1927) Threshing finished around ten. 333 bu. Oats, 74 bu. Wheat...Sat. Mar. 7 (1928) Wade helping Peter in forenoon. A fire in Palmyra in the block by the steel pole. Floyd here to dinner.

Also included were entries concerning farming activities such as the plowing, planting and harvesting of their many and varied crops and the care of their livestock. The Woodworth's kept a small herd of dairy cows, as did many farmers of the time. She wrote about the new calves that were born and each time the veterinarian was summoned and for which animal. This was a time in the agricultural history of our country when testing cattle for TB was required. The effects of contracting the disease were deadly to the animals and devastating to the economic welfare of the owners. We can appreciate the relief she felt when she indicated that the herd "passed" and were considered free of disease for the ensuing year.

There were also numerous references to the almost daily exchange of labor among the neighbors. In the times before tractors were common or essential on farms, work progressed slowly. And, as the saying goes, "many hands make light work." Each neighbor's skills and equipment were shared with the others in order for all to survive and prosper in an age of questionable economic conditions.

According to the diary, there was also a great deal of traffic into and out of their driveway. Butter, buttermilk, eggs and Christmas trees were not only sources of income, but also afforded a chance to socialize and hear the latest news. There was a reference to "callers" (visitors) nearly every day in the diary. Such entries as *McClain's came in the evening...Toward evening Mr. & Mrs. Thom came for butter & eggs...Pieters family came in the evening...Mrs. S. came for buttermilk*, are numerous throughout the book.

She recorded the births of neighbor's babies, the deaths of friends, family and neighbors, family weddings and funerals and family reunions. Also, church and Sunday school functions were noted as well as regular school activities. She wrote about giving piano lessons, of her daughter's attendance at choir practice, her son's basketball and baseball practices, and of her husband's duties at the East Palmyra Methodist church as a trustee. She indicated the importance of Election Day to the family, and yet simply stated the happenings of some holidays in a matter-of-fact manner.

I mentioned that their life was a bit paradoxical. This family worked hard and lived simply, but perhaps with "a toe in the door" of the future. A case in point is the fact that Woodworth's son and daughter-in-law continued to use an outhouse and wood-burning cook stove in this day, an age of luxurious bathrooms and microwave ovens. They did so in fact, up until their recent deaths. On the other hand, they were one of the first households in the area to install a telephone, and would travel to "the Folks' house" to listen to the fight or ball game on their battery operated radio. One can just imagine the excitement and curiosity displayed when these items were first purchased. Many entries in the diary indicate that neighbors came to them when they needed to use the telephone, or in some cases,

they delivered messages received at their home for others.
For example:

Woodhouse came twice in the evening to call a doctor. Mrs. Woodhouse sick...Lane's came to telephone...Bessie telephoned, so B & I went to tell Wade she was ready to have the window put in...Mrs. Lane came at noon time to tell us she found her husband hanging in the barn...Called the coroner & undertaker & relatives.

As mentioned, they worked hard and lived simply. Yet, very few days passed when some family member or another didn't go off the farm for some reason or another, and yes, they did have an automobile. Some examples are:

Tues, May 18...Ellison drilled corn. In afternoon rolled oat ground for Carl...C & Children went to \Newark in the evening with W & P to a concert at the Presbyterian church...Thurs., June 3...E plowed the minister's garden at East Palmyra. B went over to celebrate Prude's birthday with her...C. went to Ontario...B went to Palmyra... Etc.

Although the diaries of these two people were penned in two different time periods and under vastly different circumstances, each is important in its own way. They provide a glimpse into their lives and those around them that would not be possible otherwise. We can be thankful that they took the time to record some details, no matter how seemingly insignificant. I am not saying that every record need provide a highly detailed account, In fact, the absence of some detail leads to more enjoyment of the work in that it invites the reader to use his/her imagination to fill in the blanks.

I urge each reader to consider recording the story of some part of your lives for the sake of history—family or otherwise. All need not be told, but everyone has had some experience to relate that would make interesting reading for future generations. There are many ways to record your story using a pen, a computer, a video or audio recorder. But better yet, tell your children and grandchildren in person. Believe it or not, they will remember.

Thank you to friends Art Verbridge and Bob and Madelyn Jagger for sharing their family treasures.