

Life of George Kurth

Written by George Kurth

In 1834, Jan. 20, I was born in Witzzenhausen, Germany, where I spent the first 18 years of my life. In 1852 we, (my parents, two sisters, a brother-in-law, and a niece of mine), left Witzzenhausen, our birth place, by team and traveled to Münden, from whence we traveled in a steamer to Bremen, and from there, to Bremerhaven. On the 20th of March, 1852, we boarded a sail ship for America. It took us just seven weeks to cross the ocean, and landed in Baltimore, Md. Then the same evening we took the train for Lewiston, Pa., passing through Harrisburg, Pa. We arrived at Lewiston, Pa. on a Sunday morning the 21st of May. It was the most pleasant ride I had in all my life, because it was spring, the trees were all in blossom and in my heart it was spring too.

My brother Henry who was 13 years older than myself, was living at Lewiston, Pa., by whom I learned the cooper trade, staying there one year. The next summer I worked in a furnace and the next winter I worked at the cooper trade again, the next summer I worked on the railroad, and then I worked in the limekiln, there I got \$1.25 a day and sometimes I got \$1.50 a day.

In 1854 my oldest sister got married, on the 21st of August 1854 they left Lewiston, Pa. and went to Columbus, Wis., later on my parents and I followed, then I found that the wages in Wis. were not near so high as in Pa., but there was plenty of work.

In the latter part of the winter I went to Lowell, Wis.

where I got work as a cooper again, my sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz being quite poor and having debts on the farm, I gave them the last dollar I had and helped them all I could, hocking corn and potatoes and in harvesting.

In the latter part of summer I went to Muscoda, Grant Co. Wis., with a man who made patent bricks of lime & sand. If I could have gotten my money right away I would have bought me a farm there. That fall I swam across the Wis. river which was a mile wide there. That fall my father had me come home to Columbus again, I stayed there until the latter part of winter.

I went to Mariemack, Wis. to work as a cooper, while there I also swam across the wisconsin river. We had a splendid fourth of July there where all the farmers came together & had a basket picnic. There were Babtist, Methodist and many others, and we had a good time. Three of my German friends & I were singing some German songs at the picnic. In harvesting I helped my sister Mrs. Schwartz and in the fall I worked in a lime kiln for Mr. P. Miller about 3/4 miles from Columbus.

Then I bought Forty acres of land, one mile southeast of Columbus, my parents wanted me to stay on the farm, but that was lonesome for me & I wanted to see more of the world, and as the war broke out just then, I asked my parents if they cared if I went to war, but they had nothing to say. So on the 7th of Dec. 1861 I inlisted. We went to Milwaukee on the 12th of January 1862 we stayed in Milwaukee unti the 31st of march 1862. On that day we left the state of Wis. as a strong regement, but many left it forever. Part of the time marched on foot, and part of the time we rode on the train.

We rode through Chicago and St. Louis to Pittsburg Landing where we fought our first battle, on Sunday morning April 6th 1862. The southerners came with 80,000 against us being only (40,00 men) being the 18th Wisconsin, where I was in and the 18th Missouri & the 15th Michigan, in this great battle, the man at my right was killed and the man at my left was wounded in his leg, and the ball that struck the man behind me, just scratched my neck, this being the only wound caused by a bullet that I ever recieved. Our regiment had only between 150 & 175 men left, on the 7th of april we got half of 30,000 men led by General Buell & General Grant, We having 35,000 men left from the heavy battle of the day before, this being 65,000 men in all, we made the rebels leave faster than they had come. I heard the man at my right say on the day before the great battle, by the 4th of July we would all be home again, yes he went home the next day, but alas, to eternity. I thought then (one thousand fell to my right and 10,000 to my left). After the battle I had to stand on picket for four hours in a heavy rain. Two men had to carry provisions in napsacks, for the sick because so many were down sick on account of poor water & food & on account of sleeping on the ground.

We then marched to Corinth, where we had a few small battles, soon after all the rebels but a few left Corinth. We then took possession of it without losing many men, then we built forts but they were so far apart: we had not men enough to hold them, so they did not help us much. On the 3rd of October 1862 General Price & General Van Thorn came with 15,000 men, We lost quite a number of men that day, some were wounded & the rest killed. Among the wounded was my friend Ferdinand Bente who was shot through his lung.

In spite of all I could do for him he died after suffering three weeks. The rebels nearly got the upper hand of us that day but on the 4th of Oct. they were obliged to retreat because we drove them way back to Memphis, Tenn., then we marched through Holy Springs, & Appeville & Oxford always after the rebels, until they got help & then they came after us. They broke into Holy Springs, destroying all our ammunition & provisions, then we marched back but they had gone so we went too, so that we could go by water to Vicksburg & Jackson.

We put up our tents on lake Providence near Providence we led the water out of the Mississippi river into the lake by means of a canal, so we could pass by water, we bathed us there in march, and in the forpart of april we marched to Jackson Miss. on our way we saw three aligators. The men ahead of us had killed them already. Some of our men lost a wagon loaded with regement hospital goods in the bay, Cornelious Devor & I were the only ones that saved the goods by diving into the bay, the rest of them were afraid of the aligators.

We then got orders to march before we got the last tent out of the water, but in the morning we had to march after the rebels, We crossed the Mississippi river & whipped the rebbels at Grant Gulf, & at Raymond, Port Gibson & Jackson in Miss. where our brigade made the first attack with the 3rd against the rebels & they soon had to surrender and we took possession of Jackson the capitol of Miss. From there we marched with most of are soldiers to Champion Hills on the 14 of May. And two days later we had a short but hard battle driving the Rebles back to Hayes Bluff. During the night we encircled them, and in the next morning when they wanted to

shoot at us with their cannon. Our bullets rained so fast on them, as a hail storm (so some of the rebels told us) that they had to give up. We took them prisoners, but some of them took to their heels and ran, while the rest of them were fighting at Vicksburg. But on the 22nd of May, we surrounded them in their fort.

We made the attack on them with the bayonet, but they were too many for us. Then we wanted to starve them out, but then General Johnston was coming to attack us in the back, and we got orders to meet him in the night. The rest of the army corps., stayed by Vicksburg, but ours marched all night so the rebels could not see us move the next day.

The next afternoon our cavalry men met with the rebels & beat them back & we the infantry had marched a good ways, so we waited the rest of the night & rested, but the next morning we didn't see any rebels. We sent the cavalry out to find the rebels but they went all of 20 miles to Yazoo City but they couldn't see any rebels. So on the 30th of May we marched back to Hayes City & then to Vicksburg, but it was so hot that day that most of the soldiers dropped by the wayside on account of the heat, & when we stopped for dinner the officers let us stand in the hot sun for some time, then we boys asked them if they wanted to kill us all, then they said, "Break the ranks boys".

On the 31st of May we incircled the rebels in Vicksburg and kept them there until the 3rd of July, then they were ready to give up, but General Grant wanted to wait until the fourth of July, as we expected another attack. We had to watch more than ever, 3 men & myself had to watch the batteries all night after we had watched all of one night & one day before in spite of all I could do, the rest of the men went to sleep, but there was only one man that came by that night, the next day we took about 50,000 men prisoners officers & all, wagons, cannons, guns & all they had. After we had taken possession of Vicksburg I took sick but still I did my duty as well as I could.

In the fall we got orders to march to L. Rock, Ark., but when we got half ways there I got sick again & the Doctor sent

me to the hospital in Memphis, I was very sick for about 2 months, then I got permission to go home for a month. When I was well again I went back to my regiment which was in Huntsville Ala., a sad accident happened there as the wagon loaded with amunition was crossing the railroad track the wagon exploded killi six men by blowing them all to pieces, I was one of them that had to gather up those pieces, this was the hardest work I ever done. We stayed in Huntsville for some time working in town and being on picket too, we did alot of drilling there too.

In the first week in march I was taken sick with fever again, I also had the bloody disentary, but I still kept working as best I could, our first sergent said "That even if I was sick I did my work as well as maney of the rest and & better than many others!"

One day I had to stand on picket in the main street, I told the doctor to give me something to stop my disentery, because the Generals & Officers were passing by every little while, then the doctor said someone else should take my place, but I told him that I would rather work than be idle .

During the time we were in Huntsville, we had no trouble whatever. While there we found what they call the sensative plant, if you touched it its leaves would curl all up.

Then the rebels came and took possession of Huntsville, but could not take the Forts, then we marched to Altona, Geo. about two miles from town there was a railroad bridge which we had to watch, half a mile from our camp a train had been wrecked.. It had stopped to get wood, and another train came and ran into the first one & smashed the train, wounding some of the men. Then we had to clear away the wreckage.

There I made an oven of brick to bake bread in, every Two days I baked bread enough to supply the whole company.

We stayed there until the 3rd of October, our men thought of building a bridge, but on the 4th of Oct. the rebels came & we had to get into an old log cabin, built on purpose for shelter, there were only 20 men of us and we had to fight against a whole brigade or (20,000) men.

They thought we would give up pretty soon, but we wanted to fight as long as we could, we killed 92 rebels & wounded a large number too, but they only wounded three of our men & they shot three or four times then they had to change their position because we had killed their gunner & then they were afraid to come any closer to us, but in the afternoon a whole division of rebels came at half past four, having ten or twelve cannons each being a 10 or twelve pounder, and that was to great a number for us, then General French said "couldent you take those few men prisoners before this time". Then the brigade General told him we didnt want to give up. Then the General said we were brave men , but we had to surrender at 4 P.M. Oct. 5th .

- The rebels did not treat us as bad as some that gave up easily. They told us that we were brave men and they would like to have us on their side. They promised us good treatment and that would be the only way to get out of prison. We had to go with the rebels to Millan, Ga. there they put us in a barbwire fence- 12 to 15 feet high, in our pen were high trees- without a roof or anything over us, so we lay there until until our folks came to close to us, then they moved us farther south to Florence, S. C. where they put us in the same kind of fence as before & all we got was a pint of coarse corn meal & a teaspoon full of salt for every twenty four hours.

In February our side came nearer again so they moved us through Wilmington, S.C. where I got acquainted with a German southerner, he always told me where our side was, and when they beat the rebels, then we were great friends. First enemys (because he was on the other side) then friends. I always became bolder & was clear out of the ranks already, but there was a friend of mine I wanted him to run away with me so I went back to got him (his name was John Cook) but he didnt want to go, then I was so sorry that I had come back, because we had to march away again, there were 2 or three made a vow that we would run away that night. We marched from four o'clock in the afternoon until ten at night, passing over the north east river. I soon seen the German southerner by my side with four or five of his friends. Then I stepped out of rank

and soon we were telling each other of our past life. Then they asked how they treated us. I told them bad enough, then they all gave me something to eat. After the rest of them went to sleep this German took me off to one side & asked me if I wanted to run away that night. I told him he couldn't blame me if I did want to run away because my parents were quite old & I couldn't work much & I had to lose my health here. We sat there by the fire sometime talking in this way, then and then he said to me, "Why didn't you tell me this before when we were in Wilmington; I would have left you there, and dressed you in southern uniform & if strangers should ask you who you was you could have said my name is so & so I belong to the 27th S.C. regiment Haywoods Brigade, and that you were sick and couldn't go along any more, then you could have stayed until your own side came through there & then you would have been alright". I told him it was too late for that now & we did not know each other well enough then yet, but if your side haven't to many men on guard I could get away yet if not I could come back again, and you let the rest believe that I had gone back to the prisoners again. Then I asked him if he wanted to send a letter to his folks, I would take it along. But he said he would soon go home too, and not fight against the North.

Then we both lay down to rest in appearance enemies, but in our hearts we were friends forever, we never seen each other here again or never will, but I hope we will meet in the beautiful here-after where there would be no more war, only Heavenly peace. I had laid myself down to rest but I could not go to sleep because I was always thinking of running away so I got up and took the old road that led to the bridge. On the other side of the road were a couple of rebels on horse, but it was so dark they couldn't see, I heard one of them say, "I am glad that we are on this side of the river so the Yankees can't get us". Then I was still more in a hurry to get away, I walked until I got within two rods of the bridge, there I saw three men on guard, at first I wanted to pass them but then I seen four more on the other side, and even if I could have passed, those on the other side would have caught me. So I walked down the river ways until it was almost morning.

I thought I had to cross the river before day light, then I seen all the rebels with the rest of the prisoners asleep by the bridge. I passed a plantation there were two dogs but they didnt bark at me, I had to cross the river so I tied about 15 fence rails and made a flat boat of it, and crossed the North East river. I got accross alright this was in the morning of 25th of Feb. 1865. As soon as I got accross I thanked God for his kindness to me. All that day I walked through the swamp & cane until in the evening. I laid my tired limbs to rest on a bed of fish pole cane, after I said my prayers, I slept so sweet as though angels were garding my bed, but I don't think I had anything to eat that day. about two hours after I went to sleep, I was woke up by some shooting near by. I could hear the rebels retreating until they came to the bridge then the shooting stopped, and I went to sleep again. At first I was disappointed because I could not get out of the woods the day before, but it was for my own good I didn't, a person dosen't know what is good for him but God does. The next morning I awoke just as the sun was rising, I thanked God on my knees for the sweet rest.

Then I took a railroad tie & rolled it in the water to ride on, in the edge of the river, but the limbs were so low they always scratched my cap off. Then I went in the center of the the river, then all at once the tie turned over, I lay in the water that was over my head. I had to swim for shore with my overcoat on, and my blanket & all wet. I waded up the edge of the river because the ground was solid there in the water and on shore it was all swamp. I had walked that way for some time then the ground became more dry on shore & I stepped out of the river, and pretty soon I heard voices, but had to be very careful, who I would meet. To my great joy it was 3 negroes who were dressed in blue uniform. I went right up to them and said, "Good morning boys I am glad you have a fire here". I did not know what they would say, then they told me they belonged to the 6th Penn. Reg. & one of them asked me if I had anything to eat, he was hungry, and all I had was one corn dodger that I devided in four parts & gave each a piece, then they asked me if I had any more I said I had a little corn meal soaked

for to cook, then they cooked it and gave me some of it to eat with some sugar on it, but I did not eat very much of it. So I let them have the rest of it, because when I got back to my Co. I would get plenty to eat. Then a Lieutenant came along there, he took me for a rebel spy but when I told him who I was & showed him my testament with my name G. Kurth, Co. I, 18th Regiment, 1st brigade, 15th Army Corps, Then we became friends. I told him that the guard should stand single and not together or the rebels could kill them before they knew it. The Lieutenant went with me away to show me the road to my Co. Itell you I was glad when I saw the stars and strips again. I met a troop of Cavalry men they asked me if I had a pass, I told them I had none nor did I ask for one where I came from, they all laughed & let me pass on. As I was walking along the road I came to some Negroes that were cooking sweet potatoes, I asked them for some, at first they wouldn't give me any, but when I told them I was a prisoner they gave me more than I could eat. A little farther on I found a drunken fisherman, then a general came that way, and spoke to the fisherman who answered the General roughly then the General was going to stab him right through with his saber, but I begged for his life & he let him go. A doctor told me, We prisoners were the poorest, sadest looking lot of people he had ever seen. At four O'clock that afternoon I came to a house filled with peanuts, at first I was going to stay there all night, then I filled one of my pockets with peanuts and I traveled to Wilmington. There I made myself known to headquarters. They told me where I could get something to eat & a place to sleep. There we lived free as a bird let out of his cage. But I would rather work than be idle so they set us unloading brick. One day as I was unloading brick I seen my prison companion John Cook, but they were still treated as prisoners on our own side, John Cooke told me he was very sorry when I gave him my cooking utensils that he did not go with me. He knew well what my intentions were but it was to late. Then they packed us all in box cars and sent us to Annaoplis, Md. where we took a bath & changed our clothes. From there we were sent in box cars to Clearville, Md. where those who were to sick to go further stepped out, so I stepped out too.

That is all I knew of myself until four or five days later I came to myself again & found I was in a hospital, what they had done with me in those days I cannot tell. I had sacrificed my health for the union. When I awoke I was very thirsty, I did not know what to do with myself for thirst. I saw another soldier drinking beer from a bottle. Oh, how I wished I could have some too! But they wouldn't give me even water to drink.

My voice was so weak I could hardly speak, either they could not or would not hear me. As I got a little stronger I crept to where they kept water and beer, during the night. That helped me more than anything else. I grew stronger every day then.

I soon was able to start for home. Only home to see my friends once more, the cars had started already, but they saw me coming as fast as my weak legs would carry me, they stopped for me so we went from Clearville toward home, but I was still so thirsty

We reached Milwaukee on the 30th of March and I thought with a sad heart, "How just 3 short years ago we had left Milwaukee a strong & healthy regiment & now there were only a few left, and from those few the most of those came home with broken health to our Badger State."

The most of our Regiment was resting down south in their graves. With tears running down my cheeks & kneeling down I thanked God for my life that he had spared it, even if I was so close to death many a time.

So I reached home at last, and my friends were all ready to wait on me. One always wanted to do more than the other, but I was sick for a long time yet. Then I had all the beer to drink I wanted, because my brother Henry had a brewery.

At last I got well again, but never as well as I was before the war. Many that saw me when I came home looked at me with a sad heart, and said I was nothing but a shadow of what I was when I left home, at that time they quarreled, (each wanted to do the most for me). But now it is different we are closer to eternity than before. A person never thinks earnest enough of the future until his end is at hand, and we all go home to that Heavenly mansion. Will we all see each other again?

Oh, I hope each one of my relations will think of this question before it is too late. Amen..