

FORT PILLOW "MASSACRE"

Observations of a Minnesotan

Edited by George Bodnia

AS THE BLOODY Civil War dragged on into 1863 and 1864, and as casualty lists mounted, the North's enormous supply of manpower no longer looked inexhaustible. Although plenty of men were actually still available, numerous factors in addition to dead and wounded helped thin the ranks. Military recruiting was haphazard, for example, draft riots were widespread, and inequities like bargaining in substitutes abounded. And, as time passed, disillusionment hung like a pall everywhere. The war no longer inspired men with patriotic fervor as at first. They thought twice now about joining a conflict which brought the reality of death so pointedly to the divided nation.

Increased reluctance of whites to serve helped bring a gradual acceptance of Black soldiers in the North. Early hostility to using Blacks as soldiers gave way to at least tolerance of their being used for garrison duty, guarding lines of communication, and even participation in battles. Black soldiers in the Union army eventually totaled at least 200,000.¹ They greatly

alarmed people of the South who considered them a direct threat to their way of life. Thus Southern soldiers at times reacted violently to Blacks in the Union ranks. One place this may very well have happened was at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on April 12, 1864, in one of the most controversial actions of the entire Civil War.

Fort Pillow, located on the east bank of the Mississippi River some forty miles in a direct line north of Memphis, was an earthwork built in 1861 by Confederate General Gideon J. Pillow of Tennessee and named for him. The fort had been held by Union forces since its capture in the spring of 1862. Two years later, far

¹ James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union*, 143 (New York, 1965).

Mr. Bodnia, who received his B.S. degree in history at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, in 1969, is preparing an M.A. thesis on the Minnesota Civil War soldier and his response toward Blacks and Black soldiers.

behind the "front lines," it helped protect Federal navigation on the Mississippi. In April, 1864, it was garrisoned by 262 Blacks and 295 whites (some accounts say it was held by nearly 600 soldiers) and reinforced by the gunboat "New Era."

In the early spring of 1864 Confederate cavalrymen led by the famed General Nathan Bedford Forrest sought to delay General William Tecumseh Sherman's forthcoming invasion of Georgia by raiding Federal rear areas in western Tennessee and Kentucky. On April 10 Forrest sent a cavalry division of 1,500 men under Brigadier General James R. Chalmers from Jackson, Tennessee, to "attend to" Fort Pillow. On April 12 the Confederates quickly drove in pickets and surrounded the fort. Forrest arrived at 10 A.M. to take personal command and five hours later, having completely invested the place, demanded an unconditional surrender. The commander of the fort, Major Lionel F. Booth, had been killed by a sniper, and his inept successor, Major William F. Bradford of the Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry (Union), answered that he would not surrender in spite of the obvious futility of further resistance. The Confederates then attacked and, with little difficulty, drove the Union defenders out of the fort and over the bluff to the river. The Union loss was heavy. Out of a garrison of 557 men, some 231 were killed and 100 more seriously wounded. The Confederates took 168 whites prisoner, but only a disproportionate 58 Blacks.²

²The various military reports on Fort Pillow are in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, p. 518-623 (Washington, 1880-1901).

³See, for instance, Robert S. Henry, "First With the Most" *Forrest*, 248-68 (Indianapolis and New York, 1944) and John L. Jordan, "Was There a Massacre at Fort Pillow?" in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 6:99-133 (June, 1947).

⁴Mark M. Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary*, 295, 296 (quote) (New York, 1959). In the opinion of Carl Sandburg, "a certain moment arrived when Forrest's men were no longer fighting a battle in a war between civilized nations. They were from that moment on sharing in a race riot, a mass lynching. . ." See Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 3:38 (New York, 1939).

⁵Albert Castel, "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence," in *Civil War History*, 4:37-50 (quote) (March, 1958). For the official "Fort Pillow Massacre" report, see 38 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports*, no. 65, p. 1-128 (serial 1206).

⁶Mortimer Robinson, Charley's brother, enlisted as a drummer boy in the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry on June 6, 1861, and was mustered out on May 5, 1864. A brief diary that he kept in 1864 after re-enlisting in the Sixth Minnesota was interrupted by his death from typhoid fever. See *Minnesota History*, 20:329 (September, 1939).

Ever since the battle there has been a wide divergence between Southern and Northern accounts. Southern historians claim that Federal losses occurred because of the greatly superior strength and strategy of Forrest, and that the action took place before the Union force surrendered.³ Northern accounts maintain that the fort's defenders "surrendered as soon as the fort was overrun and were shot down in cold blood by Rebels shouting 'No quarter! No quarter! Kill the damned niggers: shoot them down!'"⁴

Members of Congress' Joint Select Committee on the Conduct of the War investigated the Fort Pillow affair at length, questioning many witnesses, and in an official report blamed the Confederates for such atrocities as shooting most of the garrison after it surrendered, burying Black soldiers alive, and burning tents sheltering Union wounded. Northern historians have tended to agree with this report while their Southern counterparts have dismissed it as war propaganda, pointing out that the committee heads — Senator Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio and Representative Daniel W. Gooch of Massachusetts — were extreme radicals who wanted to destroy the South. In a scholarly effort of 1958 to analyze the stand of both sides regarding Fort Pillow, Albert Castel concluded that there was indeed a "massacre of the garrison after it quit fighting."⁵

This judgment appears to be borne out in a letter that a Minnesota survivor, Charles Robinson, wrote to his family only a few days after the battle. The letter exists in the form of a photographic copy made from the original lent many years ago by Mrs. Peter Burghart of Excelsior, Minnesota. It is now part of the Mortimer Robinson and Family Papers in the manuscripts division of the Minnesota Historical Society.⁶

Charles Robinson was born at Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, September 11, 1839. His father, George P. Robinson, originally of New Hampshire, moved his family to Minneapolis in 1857. After working in his father's harness shop for one year, Charley became fascinated with the relatively new art form, photography, and learned the trade well as an apprentice in the daguerrean gallery of A. H. Beal. Charley was listed as an artist in the 1860 census.

The Robinson family must have had a strong anti-slavery impulse because Charley's father served on the executive committee and as secretary-treasurer of the Hennepin County Anti-Slavery Society. The excitement of his father's associations, war fever, and the chance to apply his trade helped Charley to decide to follow his friends to war. "At the time of the breaking out of hostilities he had acquired sufficient proficiency in the art of taking ambrotypes to secure a permit to

follow the regiments as a civilian and take the boys' pictures," wrote Frank G. O'Brien in the *Minneapolis Tribune* after Charles Robinson's death.⁷ From this, it appears that Robinson was a civilian photographer at Fort Pillow, but one of the more spirited Southern accounts of the battle mentions Robinson briefly as an army private who escaped by wearing civilian clothes.⁸ Regardless of the author's role, Robinson's letter takes on added importance from being a contemporary description of sordid and dramatic events for his family's perusal rather than an embellished account to impress the congressional committee.

After the war Charley tried farming and later ran a picture establishment known as the North Star Daguerrean Gallery on Washington Avenue in Minneapolis. He also served as a clerk in the office of the register of deeds and eventually became deputy register for six years and then register in 1877. He died in December, 1900, leaving this letter for posterity. It is published in its entirety. A few minor changes in punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing have been made for clarity and readability.

Columbus Ky April 17th 1864
Sunday Morning

Dear Folks at Home

As you are no doubt in great anxiety in regard to my whereabouts at this time, especially after hearing of the fight at Fort Pillow [,] I hasten to write you. Although it has been six days since the battle yet I only arrived in this place last night. The telegraph wire is cut between here & Cairo [Illinois] & for this reason I have no better way of letting you hear from me than by letter. George & I were both in the fight, and how we escaped being murdered with the rest I can scarcely tell. George is now a prisoner in the hands of Forrest. He is not wounded & is well and hearty.⁹

On the morning of the fight We put on blouses and went up to the fort & got our guns & ammunition. George took his station in the Fort while I took my place in "Co C" 13th Tenn. who were outside skirmishing.¹⁰ In about an hour after the fight commenced "Co C" was driven into the Fort by the sharpshooters, & George and I got together again. We staid [sic] together until the retreat to the river bank & then I saw no more of him until we were taken prisoners.

After our men had been fighting about four hours and were pretty well tired out, the smoke of a steamboat was seen by the river. The commander came around & said, "You have done well my boys." "Hold out a little longer for there is a boat coming with reinforcements & if we can hold the place a little longer we will have plenty of help as there is a thousand soldiers on the boat." I shall never forget the glad

shout that went up from the little Fort on this an[n]ouncement, nor will I forget how sad we all felt when the boat passed by & never offered to land. While the demand for a surrender was being considered the fireing [sic] ceased on both sides. The Rebels took advantage of this, and crawled on their hands & knees into the trenches, so that when the flag of truce went back they had gained an advantage which they could not have done had we not recognized the flag. After the boat passed and landed no troops, they made the charge. Although our men were armed with Carbines with no bayonets, yet they stood their ground until the top of the breastworks was just crowded by the rebels, & then they retreated to the river bank. The bank is about 100 or 150 feet high and very steep. Our men ran or rather tumbled down this bank & tried to get behind logs, trees, stumps, etc. to shield them from the rebel bullets.

As soon as the rebels got to the top of the bank there commenced the most horrible slaughter that could possibly be conceived. Our boys when they saw that they were overpowered threw down their arms and held up, some their handkerchiefs & some their hands in token of surrender, but no sooner were they seen than they were shot down, & if one shot failed to kill them the bayonet or revolver did not. I lay behind a high log & could see our poor fellows bleeding and hear them cry "surrender[.]" "[I] surrender[,]" but they surrendered in vain for the rebels now ran down the bank and putting their revolvers right to their heads would blow out their brains or lift them up on bayonets and throw them headlong into the river below. One of them soon came to where I was laying [sic] with one of "Co C" boys. He pulled out his revolver and shot the soldier right in the head [,] scattering the blood & brains in my face & then putting his revolver right against my breast he said [,] "You'll fight with the niggers again will you? You d—d yankee," and he snapped his revolver, but she wouldn't go off as he had shot the last load out when he killed the

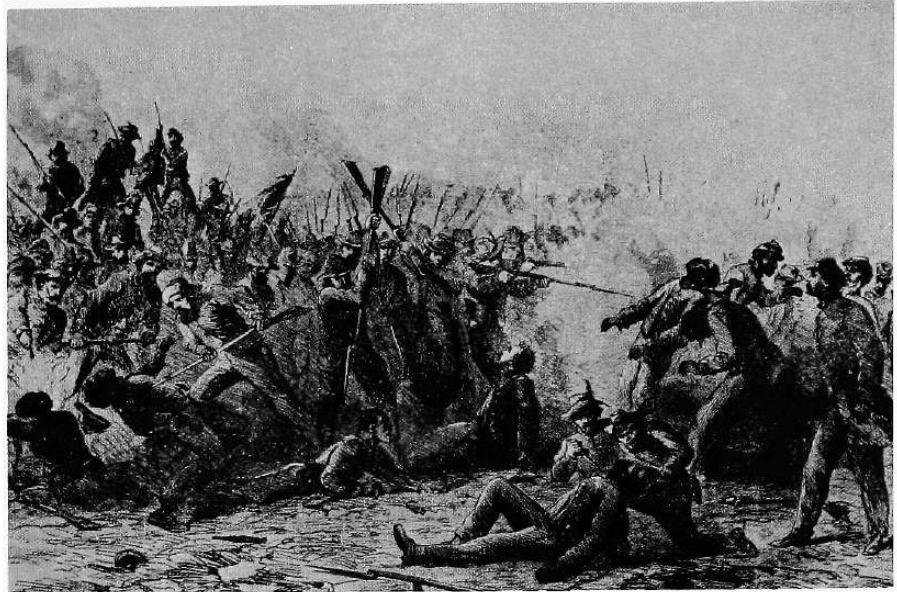
⁷ Minnesota Historical Society, *Scrapbook*, 11:151 (December 30, 1899, to January 26, 1901). A brief biography of Robinson is also published in George E. Warner, *History of Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis*, 621 (Minneapolis, 1881).

⁸ Jordan, in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 6:112. Robinson is also mentioned briefly in "Fort Pillow Massacre," 38 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports*, no. 65, p. 120 (serial 1206).

⁹ The full name of "George" has not been determined.

¹⁰ The garrison consisted largely of a battalion of the white, pro-Unionist Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry, a battery, and the Eleventh United States Colored Troops, including the Sixth United States Colored Heavy Artillery.

THIS VIEW of the fight at Fort Pillow is typical of the pictorial treatment given it by Northern artists.



soldier by my side. "Come up the hill," he said & I went up with him in front of me. When I got near the top the soldiers wanted to shoot the d—d yankee but the fellow who took me told them no, that I was his property. I all the time just had to keep quiet. He said that he saw by my pants and vest that I must be a citizen. I told him that I was. Then he said [,] ["] I want your Greenbacks & that watch.["] I told him I was a prisoner & would not let him rob me. He called to another soldier & borrowed his revolver & putting it up to my face he said [,] "Shell out — shell out quick." I shelled out. Another little cuss came up to me after these fellows left me & said, "say mister I want them boots["] I told him I would give them to him if he would get me a drink of beer as I was very dry. He went after the beer & I went to another part of the Fort & did not see him again.

I had as yet had no guard over me, & as I had a grey suit on except the blouse, & as the rebels killed our boys they would take off their coats & put them on, so that I now was dressed as they were[,] I now went to the top of the hill right amongst them & they thought I was one of their own men. I stood there & saw them shoot & bayonet our poor fellows after they surrendered. I saw them take off their clothes after they were dead. I saw them pick the pockets of the dead, & heard them laugh & cheer when they were shooting our boys who had jumped into the river to keep from being cut to pieces[.] I stood there after the fireing was over, and looked at the dead. It was truly a hard sight (I thought then that they had done all they could do, but when I returned two days after and went up to the Fort I found that I had not seen all their cruel actions for there lay the charred remains of some of the wounded soldiers, who we had left in their

houses thinking that as they were wounded they would be treated kindly.)

Well, after looking around the Fort a short time I began to think of getting away. I wanted to find Geo first for I could not bear to think that he had been killed for we have been together so long that we seem almost like brothers. I looked all around but could not find him. I then thought he might be a prisoner, and if so he would be outside the Fort. I saw the prisoners on the outside but I could not find George. I then went down in the town where they were sacking the stores. Here I met some of the clerks in the stores who were prisoners. They spoke to me[,] & the guard who had them in charge told me to fall into line, & (I fell). The clerks told him that I was one of the clerks in the store, and they wanted me with them. He treated us kindly. Gave us a drink of whiskey which I was glad to get as I was about [to] give out. He told me that I might go to my room and get my coat. But when I went I found my coat and everything else had been taken off.

After this we went down to their camps, and stopped a short time when we were turned over to Adj. Chandler who took us back to the Fort. On my way back I met George, who was there with the prisoners. I can tell you we were glad to see each other. He said that he was all right & not hurt. They wouldn't let us talk much so I had to leave him & go on to the Fort with the Adj. who had ridden back to see where I was. I had a little dispute here with the guard who had George in charge & he pulled out his revolver & said he would shoot me, but Chandler came back & took me with him & I did not see him (George) any more after this. (I went back on the same road & tried to find the prisoners after this but they were so far ahead that it was not safe to try to see George again.) By Chandler

we were taken to Gen. McCulluch¹¹ who released us & gave us a pass.

So far I had got along first rate but now I had no place to stay for they had burnt my house & in fact every house in town, & the country people were about all secesh. After we went away from the Fort we were arrested so many times that we concluded to go to the swamps & stay until the rebels left the country. We staid in the swamp in day time & slept at one of the citizens houses at night. At last we hailed the Gun Boat which came & took us aboard & whose Officers treated us with every comfort the boat afforded. I stopped [stayed? slept?] on the Boat all that day & as they were picking up wounded men & those who had escaped I really was in hopes that George might have got away & that the boat would yet pick him up. The next day the Rebs hunted the swamp with hounds, but the Gun Boat shelled them & killed several. I came up to Columbus on the Gun Boat. Here I found plenty of friends, & now I think I will stay here about a week for I do want George to get away, & if he does he will get here in this time. I may come home, but dont know now just what I will do. Give my love to all at home & tell Mort to write. Direct to Columbus.

Charley

THE RESPONSE of Black soldiers to the Fort Pillow battle was one of resilience — to fight harder — and also of revenge. This is reflected in a portion of a letter written on June 4, 1864, from Memphis, Tennessee, by Daniel Densmore of Red Wing, Minnesota, to "Dear Friends at Home." A white officer in the Sixty-Eighth United States Colored Infantry, Densmore described the reaction of his soldiers as they passed Fort Pillow by night on the river several weeks after the battle: "The motto of the 68th is, — 'Remember Fort Pillow' — and from the grim faces that gazed so intently today, upon that silent bluff, and the fierce threats that were passed around, I know that Fort Pillow will be held in remembrance when the 68th comes to show mercy."¹²

¹¹ Colonel Robert McCulloch commanded a brigade of Forrest's cavalry under Brigadier General James R. Chalmers.

¹² This letter is in the Benjamin Densmore and Family Papers in the Minnesota Historical Society.

THE ENGRAVING of Fort Pillow on page 186 and the depiction of the massacre are both from *Harper's Historical Pictorial History of the Civil War*.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).