

Martin J. Barger

Undated Letter from Barger

I am asked to tell of Stone River. If I should tell you what the books say, it would be like handing you a lemon with the juice squeezed out or stale food tasteless and impalatable [sic]. You want me to tell you what I know of Stone River of my own memory.

I was a 16-year-old boy and it is 40 years ago – do you think that an active life of 40 years, business interests and social intercourse, has left Stone River fresh in Memory? Do you think that the happy spirit of which I am possessed came with the ever present spectacle of that field, the upturned pallid cheek of the dead school mate of my childhood days, who sitting with me upon the play grounds, played mumble peg and on the school bell ground clayed bull pen and three cornered cat, or fought with caution the “Bumble Bee” and hornet and played mimic ware and bathed with me in the swimming hole of the brook. As they lay there on that awful battle ground--No, No, a thousand times no – I have rather taken myself to the forests to hear the song of birds and watch the nimble squirrel race his mate from tree to branch and gather from God given surroundings the sweets of life and for 40 years, I have tried to teach my memory to forget Stone River and all other battles.

Can I call back old times and bid him lay me down again the springtime of my youth, my 16 year old boyhood of 40 years ago. After Christmas day, the 26th day of December 1862, comes upon my memory. If I had the brush of one of the Masters, I'd like to paint upon that canvas the frown of heaven the lowering clouds – the flood of tears of weeping angels, as our army broke camp at Edgefield and crossing the river marched through Nashville to a place of Nolansville [sic] Pike when in the rain and cold we bivouacked for the night. We had for supper rain soaked hard tack and uncooked fat meat, then we lay upon the cold wet ground for sleep.

The next day, again we advanced toward Murfreesboro and again the heavens wept all day and at night, wet and muddy, we stopped in a wood for the night. No fires were kindled, and rain soaked hard tack and fat meat without coffee must satisfy our hungry stomachs. And again the cold wet earth was our bed. This night we lay upon our arms for not far away was the enemy. That night snow came and some freezing, so that the edges of our clothing froze to the earth.

One morning, after some maneuvering, we were in line and stripped for battle. I well remember my good old knap sack with its load of wet blankets and dog tent as it lay in the long row of thousand others, that for the shifting of our line a little to the right we saw no more forever. And from the day until after the end of the battle we had neither shelter of any nor fire while the rain and snow continued.

All day we fought and at night having gained a little strip of timber in our front we lay in line of battle sleeping on our arms. Early on the next morning, Johnson's division on our right was vigorously attacked and driven from their position while his artillery and other horses were off being watered, by which his batteries were left on the field where his man became confused and went to the rear. Our division Davis, Jeff C. Davis's was in position to from a flanking fire of reps and canister and musketry at short range into the enemy as they advanced upon Johnson. My regiment supported Carpenter's battery and received the charge of the enemy as in their maddened, successful fury, they turned from Johnson and attacked us. Nearly all of our artillery men were shot down and the battery silenced, and then came the furious charge of the now victorious enemy, who overlapping our right poured in a flanking fire and being about surrounded we got ourselves to the rear leaving our dead and wounded on the field, and there it came on to be night. Cold, wet, and hungry and discouraged, we again ate soaked hard tack and raw fat meat and with no tent, blanket, or fire to warm us, we lay us down to sleep through another rainy, snowy, freezing night, the clouds our covering and the stones our pillow. Day came, cloudy and unbidden. There was fighting nearly all along the line and a masked battery of about 30 pieces belched forth destruction into the rebel ranks, and began turning the tide of battle our way. Then came the charge of Breckenridge's Kentucky and Tennessee Troops on our left and just as night began to set in Davis's division was ordered into the fray.

Charging across the river now a swollen torrent on account of the rains we arrived on the scene of battle just in time to give Breckenridge a parting volley as he wavered. And, completely routing him, for which great praise was given Davis's division, in which was the 25th Ills. I remember the old cotton field, the rain and the mud of that night and the freezing which fastened my clothing to the earth.

Here in the quiet of the night as I lay beside one of my company out in that cotton field, I well remember his turning over a dead rebel and taking from his pocket a roll which upon examination was found to contain two pairs of little gloves, one pair of which I sent home in a letter, and have yet my home.

What a story they tell – It was Christmas time the day of gifts to loved ones and herein I see a father of two little girls purchasing two pair of little gloves to send or take to loved ones in the home to which he never returned. He was a Tennesseeian [sic] for he belonged to Breckenridge's Corps, and may have been near his home. How many hundreds of little girls or wives and mothers had that Christmas in tears and heart aches. How many fathers, husbands and sons saw their last New Years day at Stone River, how many celebrated that day by giving up their lives on the alter of their country. Let the angels count, we cannot tell – Stone River literally ran red with the blood of the patriots wounded, who crept to her sheltering banks, and exhausted by loss of blood rolled down the steep into the water and floated away.

The next day the sun arose clear in the morning, the first as I remember since the 26 of December, and on the 3rd of January, not a gun was fired – peace to those who fell, and joy to them that survived.

Retyped as he wrote it

By Prudy Paulius

Great Granddaughter