

Old Jerry: "They Said I Was A Hero"

By Rebecca Blackwell Drake



Located on a hillside in the Raymond cemetery is a small and simple headstone that states, "*Jerry Ross, Born a Slave 1839-1903, A Faithful Slave - A True Friend*". The headstone was erected by a Confederate veteran, Henry Clay Sharkey, who served as a private in Co. C, 3rd Mississippi Infantry. "*Old Jerry,*" a slave on the Sharkey Plantation in Hinds County, accompanied his

young master, **Henry Clay Sharkey**, to war and soon became a favorite among the entire company because of his cheerful disposition and many talents. In 1863, even after the slaves were freed, "*Old Jerry*" refused to leave Company C and remained in the regiment as one of the cooks.

"*Old Jerry*" and Pvt. Sharkey went through the Vicksburg Campaign together, then on to Georgia and the campaign for Atlanta. By this time, the men in the 3rd Mississippi thought of "*Old Jerry*" as one of the regiment.

After the war, Sharkey wrote his memoirs of "Old Jerry" and the time they spent together during the perilous years of war. His memories were comical as well as endearing: *"Old Jerry was not old in years but all of Company C knew him as Old Jerry, belonging to a private in that company. Jerry's make-up might have been the cause of his being dubbed 'Old' as he was of very large body and short legs, his feet turning out when he walked and his head being almost nude of wool. Jerry was a merry, laughing, obliging servant and his laugh was musical and contagious. No member of Company C ever called on Jerry for a favor that they did not get a promise; but often he could not fulfill his promises as they were too many and varied.*

"Jerry had been born on a large farm in Hinds County and, on account of the formation of his legs and feet, was taught the blacksmith's trade, as his kind master did not think he could stand the plow. The indulgent mistress [Mrs. Sharkey] of Jerry and mother of the soldier insisted that Jerry should be the body servant of Clay as the mistress had so much confidence in Jerry's fealty to his young master and the Southern Cause.

"Every member of Company C had confidence in Jerry and they often gave him large sums of Confederate money to forage the surrounding country when in camp. Never did "Old Jerry" fail to get their money's worth nor did he ever embezzle any funds. Jerry always put members of Company C as the heroes of his stories and his young master as the principal actor in deeds of chivalry. Jerry was a regular war correspondent as to the news from the front when on his foraging trips, and he never carried any news of defeat; but all was victory for the Confederacy with him."

Not only was "Old Jerry" befriended by Pvt. Sharkey but other members of the company as well: *"Jerry was very proud of his company, as he called Company C, and was very fond of its officers; but when punishment fell on his young master, Jerry expressed his dissent in no uncertain terms. As the officers all knew Jerry and his attachment for the company, and especially for his young master, they laughed off any of Jerry's harsh words or muttered disapprovals. The officers were always joking Jerry and therefore took from him what they would resent from others."*

Following one of his foraging trips, “*Old Jerry*” returned to camp to find his young master in the confines of “*The Bull Pen*” (camp prison). Unhappy that the officers were making his beloved master suffer in such an undesirable place, he proceeded to take Sharkey some of the food he had gotten while out foraging. The officers stopped him complaining, “*You can’t take all these things you brought to Sharkey, as we all paid in for them.*” At this, “*Old Jerry*” pulled their money from his pocket and handed it back to them saying, “*Here is all your money. I didn’t have to pay a cent for what I got. I just told the good white ladies who I belonged to and they knew what kind of folks my folks was, and they giv me what I got and when I told them where I was gwine dey patted me on de back and said I was a hero.*”

The soldiers laughed and insisted that the ladies from whom “*Old Jerry*” had foraged knew nothing of his plantation owners. Jerry responded to the accusation saying: “*I told a lady way up in Kentucky who I b’longed to and what smart folks they was, and she said she expected everybody knew of our folks, but Mr.[President] Davis, who didn’t know that Marse Clay [Sharkey] was a private, or he would have made him a general.*” The soldiers removed Sharkey from the bull pen and everyone had their share of the foraged food.

“*Old Jerry*” remained with his master and the 3rd Mississippi until Sharkey was injured in 1864 while fighting at Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia. Seeing the bloody turn the war had taken, Sharkey felt it best to send Jerry home: “*I was sent to Thomastown, Ga., with Jerry as my nurse, from Kennesaw Mountain, June 24th, and then furloughed, Jerry and I parted as I would not take him back into Tennessee, as it was too hard a trip for him though he insisted that I needed someone to care for me.*” “*Old Jerry*” returned to Hinds County, although he was most unhappy that Sharkey would continue in the war without him.

“*Old Jerry*” died in Raymond in 1903, having lived just long enough to see in the turn of the century. Henry Clay Sharkey never lost his devotion to his old friend and body servant. One of the last things that Sharkey did before his own death in the 1930s was to order a headstone for “*Old Jerry*” and have it erected in the Raymond Cemetery. It was Sharkey who inscribed the stone: “*A Faithful Slave – A True Friend.*”

In his memoirs, Sharkey memorialized “Old Jerry” saying, “*The love of the slave for his master and the strong bond of sentiment that bound master to the slave even death cannot sever. Memory – a spiritual Gift – still exists.*”



**Surviving veterans of Co C, 3rd Mississippi in 1908 at the unveiling of the Confederate Monument. Picture are 1) Jno. Osborne 2) Jos. B. Collins 3) Henry Clay Sharkey 4) Jno. Lowery 5) Henry McNair 6) Andrew Ewing 7) Monroe McKay 8) H. C. Marshall 9) Sebe Biggs.
Photograph courtesy Richard Mellon**

*Historic Source: “Old Jerry;” TCV; Vol. 24, No. 6 (June 1916), from the files of Annie Laurie Sharkey. “To Live and Die in Dixie”, A History of the Third Mississippi Infantry, C.S.A.,” by H. Grady Howell, Jr. 1908 photograph of Company C, 3rd Mississippi, courtesy of Richard Mellon of Bolton, great grandson of Col. T. A. Mellon. The inscription on the back of the photograph was written by Henry Clary Sharkey in

1908: "A picture of members of Co. C 3rd Miss Regt. Inf. Known as Downing Rifles who were present at the unveiling of the Confederate Monument April 29, 1908, 47 years after their enlistment in the CS Army 1861. Presented to Miss Kate Mellon, president of the U. D. C. Chapter at Bolton, Miss. who is the daughter of Col Thomas A. Mellon, the 1st captain of the company 1861 and the last colonel, 1865."