

Recollections of a Private's War Experiences and Homecoming

*Wars are fought and victories won,
by the private soldier who shoots the gun,
When war is over and history's writ,
the private soldier's not in it.*

By H. Clay Sharkey

H. Clay Sharkey, 3rd Mississippi Co. C, and 5th Alabama Cavalry, Co. D, tells how he manages to transfer from the infantry to cavalry, then, during Wilson's Raid of Alabama, he escapes possible capture at the battle of Selma by a quick trade of horses. Clay Sharkey was in the hospital when General Hood attacked the Federals outside Alabama as they crossed Peach Tree Creek. Clay Sharkey's regiment, as well as several other Mississippi regiments, was decimated in the fierce battle. Casualties included two of Clay's brothers.

"When I came home from the War I had not heard from my mother in five months, nor had she heard from me in that time. You know by December 1864 most of Mississippi was occupied by Federal troops. All Confederate troops had been moved out and no mail came to us in Alabama, nor went from us to our home state.

While I belonged to Company C, 3rd Mississippi, I had been sent to the 5th Alabama Cavalry regiment where I lost my name; they called me "Old Missip."

I had been in the hospital at Iuka when the order came that all those in the hospital who could afford a mount would be detailed to the Cavalry. I was in better health than I had been for some time but my feet had been so frost-bitten that I couldn't walk; neither could I wear shoes, but you did not need shoes in the Confederate Cavalry at the time.

I had the money, and I bought a horse, such as it was, from the mother of the man who waited in the hospital. I paid \$1200 for a two and a half-year-old colt. He was very poor and I had neither bridle nor saddle. A farmer gave me some old bits, and he said that another farmer, whom he had named, made his own ropes. I went to him for a rope and he put his girls and wife to work; the old lady spun the cotton and the girls strung the

threads. The farmer had fixed a board and box by which he manipulated the threads somehow, and made a good rope. I tied my blanket and haversack on the horse and was equipped for the Cavalry! It was then that I was placed in Company D, 5th Alabama Cavalry, Captain Brown's Company.

This is the way I lost my horse and got another to ride home. Our company was detailed to follow Wilson's Raid and the Captain was instructed to send a man every day to report which way Wilson was going. Just a day or two before the surrender I was sent with dispatches and came near being in the battle of Selma. I went by old Elyton, now a part of Birmingham. There I was arrested because the Home Guard didn't understand that the dispatches that I carried amounted to a pass. (Evidently he was released)

I started back the way I had come and soon I heard firing in my rear and realized that our troops were retreating. I came to slough through which I had safely come on my way to Selma, but troops had passed through it since until it was awful. They had thrown blankets and all sorts of things in it. My horse went down and we both went under. I came up covered with slime and mud and made my way to shore, but the horse went back to the opposite shore. The Federals were too close for me to think of attempting to go back for him. A Confederate lieutenant colonel rode into the slough about that time and down he went. His horse came out on my side but the Colonel was too far from that side to get through, so I guess he was captured. Anyway, my horse was on his side and his horse was on my side, and the slough between us, so I thought it a fair exchange and rode his horse on back to my command. That was the horse I rode home after the surrender. I surrendered with Company D at Danville, Alabama, on the 13th day of May, 1865, and started for home, reaching there on June 4th.

Well, no words can picture that "homecoming" of a boy to a mother who had lost in the war three sons, Captain J.W. Sharkey, Lieutenant McM. and Ed Sharkey in battle, and who had not known in five months whether the remaining one might have suffered a like fate. Ah, my mother was a wonderful woman and a loyal Confederate. "