

A PERILOUS ADVENTURE.

THE CONFEDERATE RAM WEBB DOWN THE MISSISSIPPI

Running the Blockade at the Mouth of Red River—Passing New Orleans— Blown Up.

Corpus Christi, Tex., Sept. 15.—To The News: Although the war has long since become a thing of the past, while many of the actors that participated in the great tragedy have passed from off the stage of life, still the deeds of daring and of heroism of that eventful period are yet fresh in the minds of men, and in after years will form an important niche in the history of our country when some future historian seeks to prove the valor and courage of the American people. Neither Sparta nor Greece in their palmiest days ever sent forth nobler heroes to battle for their rights than did the south in that great struggle which shook the earth like a mighty earthquake and transformed streams of limpid water into rivers of human blood.

Some of these old heroes are still in the enjoyment of life, following the quiet pursuits of peace and surrounded by their families. They rarely speak of "the days that tried men's souls," and then only when urged by some one of a later generation or when recalling war times with some old comrade in arms.

One of this kind is Mr. William Biggio, the proprietor of the St. James hotel in this city, and one of the most modest and unassuming of men. And yet Mr. Biggio is the hero of an event that will go down in history as one of the most daring deeds of the entire war, for those who participated in it little thought when they entered upon the task that they would ever live to tell it. I refer to the running of the blockade at the mouth of Red river by the confederate ram Webb, and of her perilous journey down the Mississippi to a point below New Orleans.

Three years ago I learned incidentally that Mr. Biggio was a pilot on the Webb, and though I implored him repeatedly to relate to me the story of that exciting voyage down the Mississippi, with that true modesty which characterizes every real hero when called upon to relate his own experiences, he invariably put me off, always saying "he probably would at some other time." Recently, however, my opportunity came and I was not slow to take advantage of it. An article appeared in The News, written by Mr. C. F. Adler, telling the story of the "Dolly Webb," as he termed her, and of how she ran the blockade, etc. I saw the article and took it to Mr. Biggio to learn whether or not it was correct. After reading it over carefully, Mr. Biggio smiled and said:

"Mr. Adler was no doubt honest in his belief, but he was far from being correct." I then appealed to him to give the true story of the Webb as a matter of history, and with much reluctance he finally consented to do so. It is as follows and I give it in his own words:

The W. H. Webb was built in New York several years prior to the war for the New York underwriters. She was of fine model and was employed for wrecking purposes and for assisting vessels in distress. She had two independent engines, two walking beams, 35-foot wheels, and was the most powerful vessel of her size then extant. After being used by those for whom she was originally built for a few years, she was sold to Peter Marcy of New Orleans.

did as commanded. By this time every whistle of the fleet was screaming, drums were beating, rockets were going up and it seemed as if the very devil was to pay. I kept the Webb straight on her course, however, headed for the biggest opening, and before a gun was fired we had passed the blockade, and had turned the bend and were making down the Mississippi river. We had run the gauntlet and were now between the devil and the deep sea. After we had gone down the river some distance the Manhattan fired a few shots, but they did us no harm."

Passing out of Red river and through the very jaws of death, it was only to encounter new and greater dangers before the gulf could be reached. At Hogg Point, three miles below the mouth of Red river, an exchange of prisoners was going on between a federal and confederate boat. The confederates knew the Webb was coming, and when she passed they saluted her by blowing their boats' whistles, the Webb answering the salute in like manner. After passing Hogg Point the Webb looked back and saw two federal gunboats following her. She kept straight on her course and soon discovered that she was rapidly leaving her pursuers in the distance.

All the way from Red river to New Orleans federal gunboats were supposed to be anchored in the river every five miles. As the Webb would approach one of the boats she would be signaled. The signal would be answered by Kelly, one of the quartermasters of the Webb, who remained on deck uncovering lights. When the Webb was nearly on a gunboat Kelly would run up any kind of a light and the Webb would be past the federal boat before the fraud would be discovered. About fifteen miles below the mouth of Red river the Webb came to, lowered a boat and a squad was sent ashore to cut the telegraph wires. This operation was performed several times and thus passed the first night after running the blockade at the mouth of Red river.

"At daylight," says Mr. Biggio, "we were close on to a gunboat lying in front of Donaldsonville. She ran up her signals and at the same time ran out her guns. We thought we were in for it, but fortunately it was nothing more than drill and the guns were run back again. The signals of the federal vessel were duly answered by the Webb, flags being used in the day time in the same manner that lights were used at night. We could have destroyed millions of dollars worth of property on our trip, but our sole object was to run the blockade and to do so as quickly as possible. After getting safely by the boat just mentioned, the captain ordered us to slow up, in order that we might pass New Orleans in the night. Passing boats, however, showed us the folly of such a thing, so we determined to pass New Orleans as soon as possible. We cut the telegraph wires ten times between Red river and New Orleans, but this was foolish, as we afterward ascertained, as it was unnecessary and caused us to lose valuable time.

"After determining to pass New Orleans as soon as possible, we made the best time we could down the river. About 1 o'clock p. m. we reached New Orleans and found the federal fleet lying at St. Mary's market. We were all feeling good, thinking that everything was all right and that we were not expected. We reckoned wrong, however, for just as we got abreast the Lackawanna, a 24-gunship, her captain got the news of our coming. Before he could get his men all to their quarters, however, we were right on him, in fact so close that a rock could have easily been thrown from one boat to the other. In less time almost than it takes to tell it, the Lackawanna gave a shot that went clear through the Webb abreast the forehatch, four feet from the water's edge, and landed in Algiers. After the first shot Captain Read ordered Kelly to haul down the false colors and run up the colors of the confederacy, as he expected to see the Webb sunk right there and wanted her to go down right with her own colors flying from the masthead. After giving this order, the captain walked to the side of the Webb nearest the firing and remained there until we passed. Pilot Jim West, an old Red river pilot, who was helping me handle the vessel, laid down on the deck and I was left alone at the wheel. The Lackawanna's first

pandering to sentiment, so we acted upon the captain's advice and divided into three parties, each party striking out for itself in the endeavor to get back into the confederate lines. The party I was with numbered twenty-two, and our first move was to get through the swamp to Pearl river, but failed. One of the parties, numbering about twenty-two, surrendered to the Holyhock that same evening. My party tramped around in the swamps until dark, when we went to a planter's house to get something to eat. This he gave us in a hurry in order to get rid of us as quickly as possible, for fear the enemy would find us there and arrest him for harboring confederate soldiers. That night we slept in his hay loft, contrary to his orders, and the next morning we went to another planter's house for breakfast. Breakfast was served us in short order, and we were then requested 'For God's sake move on.' This we did and we soon found ourselves in a public road, where we were captured by a company of cavalry.

"We were then kept under guard for three days, while a detachment of the cavalry went out to hunt for the rest of the Webb's crew. At the end of that time we were marched to New Orleans, and all over it like a circus train. As we passed windows ladies would wave handkerchiefs and shower flowers upon us, while repulsive and frenzied negroes danced around us in the streets and amused themselves by spitting on us and kicking us. After being exhibited all over the city as so many wild animals, we were marched to the old 'Picayune Press' and kept in confinement till two weeks later, when we were exchanged.

"We heard nothing of Captain Read and his party until about the time of our release. It seems that the captain and his party went to the river bank the night following our separation and hailed an oyster boat on the pretext of wanting to buy some oysters. When the boat came ashore it was taken possession of by the captain and his men and they started for the gulf, which they reached in safety. Here their good luck deserted them, however, and they were permitted to enjoy the freedom of the high seas but a very short time, for a federal gunboat picked them up and they were brought to New Orleans prisoners. Shortly after our release the surrender came and this ended forever my occupation as a sailor in the confederate navy."

This is the true and simple story of the confederate ram Webb and her daring crew as related by one who played an important part in her never-to-be-forgotten journey down the Mississippi river at a time when such an undertaking was considered almost certain death. Of all the deeds of daring and of valor performed during the war none was attended with greater dangers than this, and it seems that nothing save the hand of Providence alone could have guided the little Webb on her perilous journey and preserved the lives of those who were willing to die in her defense.

JEFF McLEMORE.

who used her as a low-bar tow-boat. These tow-boats were very powerful vessels and the Webb was the most powerful of all.

When New Orleans was captured by Butler the Webb was sent up to Red river by her owner for safe keeping. Soon after reaching Red river she came into possession of the confederates and it was decided to convert her into a ram. She was accordingly strengthened and fitted up as such with an armament of one 32-inch swivel rifle in her bow, two 9-inch decoy guns, one on each side, and two 12-pounders aft. Thus equipped, the Webb was ready for work as a confederate ram.

The first exploit of the Webb was to sink the federal gunboat Indianola. The Indianola had run the gauntlet at Vicksburg and was the first blockade vessel at the mouth of the Red river. It was while lying there that the Webb ran into her one night and sent her to the bottom of the river. Shortly after this the Webb had another fight at Atchafalaya and was fast getting up a reputation as an enemy to the federals that would need watching.

The Webb's exploits attracted the attention of the confederate war department and the idea was conceived of bringing her to the gulf, where she could work on a larger and more effective scale. To bring her out was a very desperate undertaking, as the Mississippi river was full of federal gunboats, to say nothing of the blockade at the mouth of the Red river. But for desperate undertakings there can always be found desperate men, and the war department was not long in finding a man with the courage to undertake the job. The exploits of Captain Charles Read of the confederate navy in destroying thirty-five merchantmen in the Atlantic ocean had rendered him famous, so he was selected as the proper man to get the Webb into the gulf. Captain Read was accordingly sent from Richmond and arrived in Shreveport in March, 1865.

Captain Read immediately began the task of getting his vessels ready for the dangerous undertaking. His first work was to organize a crew, which was soon done, Mr. Biggio and Jas. Kelly being made quartermasters. The next work was the coaling of the vessel and placing on board 250 tons of the fattest pine knots that could be found and a large amount of rosin. The Webb was well provisioned and then moved down the river as far as Alexandria, where 250 bales of cotton were taken aboard for the protection of the pilot house and the machinery. Every visible part of the vessel was then whitewashed, as a white vessel is not so easily seen on the water at night as one of a dark color.

While lying here an incident occurred that would have made many an old sailor shake in his boots. No matter how safe and sound a vessel may be there is an old superstition among sailors that rats will invariably desert her if disaster, though unseen, is ahead. It was the last night of the Webb at Alexandria and at daylight the following morning she was to start down the river on her perilous voyage. Mr. Biggio was on watch and about 3 o'clock in the morning he noticed the rats flocking to the side of the vessel nearest the shore and jumping overboard. At 4 o'clock Kelly came to relieve him, when he related to him the story of the rats.

"Kelly looked at me in a dazed sort of way," remarked Mr. Biggio, "but said nothing. I told him there was going to be trouble aboard. I had never believed in the superstition about rats before, but that morning I couldn't help believing in it to save my life. I felt that the rats knew that danger was ahead and subsequent events proved that they were right."

Just before daylight the Webb severed her moorings at Alexandria and moved down the river about forty miles, where she tied up. At this point a spar torpedo, fastened to a 35-foot spar, was attached to the bow of the boat. It was intended with this torpedo to blow up the Manhattan or one of the other large vessels lying at the mouth of Red river, provided it became necessary. After getting the spar satisfactorily arranged the Webb moved slowly down the river, the intention being to reach the mouth of the river just after dark. This was accomplished and so far all plans had worked well.

In front of the Webb, only a few hundred yards distant, lay the federal fleet of about six vessels. It was a moment of anxiety, and I can not better describe it than to quote Mr. Biggio's own language:

"It was a little after 8 o'clock in the evening, on a starlight night in April, when we first descried the enemy's vessels. All of our lights were concealed and we were running very slow in order not to make much noise, that we might get as near the fleet as possible without being dis-

shot was followed by others. Her second shot was aimed at the pilot house, but struck a bale of cotton and glanced up, passing over the pilot house and doing no damage. The third shot from the Lackawanna went through the chimney guys of the Webb and did but little harm. By this time we were turning the bend of the river, just below New Orleans, when the firing from the Lackawanna ceased, her captain discovering that her shots were going straight into Algiers and doing great damage there.

"At the lower part of Algiers, at anchor in the middle of the river, was a large vessel which we supposed was the federal gunboat Hartford. 'Make straight for her and give her the torpedo,' shouted Captain Read. The torpedo crew were at their post and the torpedo was quickly lowered. In ordering it lowered, however, the captain forgot to give the signal to slow the boat up. The result of this was that we were going so fast when the torpedo struck the water that the pressure of the water caused it to swing round and there was imminent danger of the Webb being blown up. Seeing his mistake and the danger the boat was in from her own torpedo, the captain yelled to the torpedo crew to 'cut her loose,' which was done just in time, as the torpedo was within a foot of the vessel when the spar was cut in twain.

"In a few moments we had slowed up and were alongside the federal vessel. She proved not to be the Hartford, but the ship Fear Not loaded with fixed ammunition. Had we run into her with the torpedo as we intended, the chances are that no one on either boat would have been left to tell the tale. When we got alongside the Fear Not an incident occurred that I remember as distinctly as if it had occurred yesterday. A federal officer was standing on the deck of the Fear Not with a lady, Price, one of the pilots of the Webb, picked up a gun and was just in the act of shooting at the officer when Captain Read ordered him to desist. Price reluctantly obeyed, remarking as he laid the gun down, that it was the first time he was ever ordered not to shoot at a Yankee.

"Seeing that the Fear Not wouldn't molest us, our next thought was to get away, so down the river we went. Looking back we saw the steamer Hollyhock coming after us. The Hollyhock was a low-bar towboat, fast and powerful, but not quite as large as the Webb. Our object was to keep ahead of her, and this we did with but little trouble. Whenever she could get in straight reach of us she would give us a shot, but none of her shots did us any injury. She chased us down the river thirty-two miles below New Orleans, when all of a sudden we ran right on top of the war-sloop Richmond, a 24-gun ship, lying in the middle of the river. As we neared her we saw that she had both broadsides out.

"The Webb was then slowed up and Captain Read called all of the officers in front of the pilot house and addressed them: 'It's no use,' said he. 'It's a failure. The Richmond will drown us all, and if she does not the forts below will, as they have a range of three miles each way up and down the river, and they know by this time that we are coming. Had we passed New Orleans without being discovered I would have cut the wires below the city and we could then have reached the gulf with but little trouble. As it is, I think the only thing left for us to do is to set fire to the Webb and blow her up.' When the captain finished talking not a word was spoken by any one, but every man bowed his head in respectful obedience and their silence was all the answer that was needed. Captain Read then ordered the pilot and myself, who were at the wheel, to steer for the shore, and to the gunner he said: 'Set the fires,' which had already been arranged in all parts of the vessel with slow match and magazine.

"Hardly had the captain finished his order to 'run her ashore' when we were making for the east bank of the river. We struck bottom fifty yards from the shore, running the Webb's nose out in four feet less water than she drew. Life lines were then thrown over the bow of the boat to get overboard by, and everybody commenced trying to get ashore like rats leaving a ship. As soon as we got on land we struck out across a sugar plantation until we reached the back of it, where we hid from the enemy's view and yet could see the Webb. In the meantime the Hollyhock steamed up to the Webb and tried to put out her fires with water hose. She also rescued a man by the name of Preston and a boy named Hyner, who had remained on the Webb and made no effort to escape. The Hollyhock then took from the Webb her flags and small arms and backed away.

covered. We approached close enough to distinguish every vessel and were within 500 yards of them before they discovered us. I was at the wheel and we had slowed up the vessel as much as possible preparatory to making the final run of the gauntlet. The steam in the engines was very high and the engineer called to the captain that he couldn't stand it any longer without blowing the vessel up. At this moment a rocket went up from the federal fleet and we knew that we had been discovered. Captain Read then yelled, 'Let her go!' and I rang the fast bell. The engineer threw the throttle wide open and the Webb fairly leaped and trembled all over. 'Keep her for the biggest opening between them,' shouted the captain, and I

it was now seven o'clock in the afternoon, and from our position at the back of the plantation we watched the Webb burn. At length her magazine was reached, and with an explosion that shook the waters far and near the confederate ram Webb was no more.

"After the Webb had blown up we grazed silently in the direction of the vessel a few moments and saw the Hollyhock, which again steamed up to her and laid at the bank. The captain then called us together, about eighty in number, and addressed us as follows: 'I don't know what to tell you; break up in small parties and do the best you can.' The captain's words were full of emotion, and impressed us all very much. But there was no time for