



ESCAPE!

by Albert H. Hutchinson

The author, a Union soldier during the Civil War, was captured by the Confederates and interned in Camp Ford, a prison near Tyler, Texas. On March 18, 1865, he and four companions attempted an escape. Here is their story, as it appeared more than a half century ago.

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Outside the stockade, the rebels had established a building which they designated a hospital, but which was actually only a shack to which the sick and dying were dispatched to breathe their last. A detail of prisoners accompanied them to attend them while they lived and bury them after they died. It was around several of those male nurses that I constructed the initial phase of our escape plan. They had passes enabling them to enter and leave the stockade, and after winning their confidence over a period of time I finally prevailed upon them to assist us. Five of them agreed that upon returning from the hospital they would smuggle their passes to us. Then, as soon as the sentry at the gate was relieved, we five "nurses" would go out.

Everything worked as planned. The sentry passed us without a word, although he scrutinized me so closely that I feared we had been detected, and my hand trembled so that I could hardly hold the pass.

On our arrival at the hospital we sent the passes back by one of our officers so that the nurses would not be suspected. We remained at the hospital until after nightfall, and then began threading our way between sentries—an ordeal that took two or three hours. Eventually we reached a distance of relative safety and, taking the North Star as our guide, headed in its direction.

We traveled all that night, giving farmhouses a wide berth lest we awaken the hounds, and hid in the woods during the day. The next night we pushed on through the tangled undergrowth, maintaining as rapid a pace as we could, and shortly before daylight reached the Sabine River.

We could hear the sweep of the water, but we had to wait for sunrise to determine exactly how much of a problem it would present—and then what a sight met our eyes! The river, swollen by heavy rains, had so greatly overflowed its banks that the bottomland on either side of it was flooded as far as the eye could see—and that bottomland extended two miles on either bank.

It was a dreary outlook, but it was either cross that river or return to the fort, and we chose without hesitation the lesser of the two evils.

Not waiting for night, we began the crossing. Sometimes we waded in water up to our necks, and sometimes we swam from one knoll to another, using a grapevine to pull Tom, who couldn't swim. Most of the time when we hauled him he was underwater, but he was so irrepressibly good-natured that when he surfaced he always had a broad grin.

Cold, wet, and hungry, we reached the river proper some time before nightfall, but the current was so swift that we decided to camp on high ground and wait until morning before attempting the hazardous crossing.

At daybreak we began planning how to get helpless Tom across the river. Finally we built a makeshift raft of logs and brush—not a very elaborate vessel, but we believed it would serve the purpose.

We fastened a long grapevine to the raft and then cast lots to see who would be the one to try the current and carry the improvised cable to the opposite shore. The lot fell to me, and I put the slip noose over my shoulder and struck out.

Things went satisfactorily enough until

I reached the middle of the river, where the vine became tangled on a snag. I began drifting rapidly downstream, the noose began tightening, and the force of the current pulled me under water. It was only by the most desperate effort that I struggled loose and, too exhausted to swim, finally managed to touch bottom—on the same side of the river that I had started from.

I didn't relish the idea of trying the passage again, but there was no alternative, so after making a new cable I plunged in once again. This time I reached the other side without difficulty, and after hauling Tom over aboard the raft we continued slogging across the swampy bottomlands. It took us till evening to reach dry land—two whole days to get across a river!

All that night and the next we followed the North Star, making meager progress now because three of us were barefoot and our feet were painfully bruised. We believed that we were very near the Red River, and knew that once across it and into Arkansas, any people we encountered could probably be trusted. Feeling certain that we had almost reached safety, we took renewed courage.

But we didn't know what awaited us just ahead. Coming out of the swamp toward the close of day, we suddenly stumbled upon a fellow skinning a sow. Before we were able to retreat he challenged us.

He guessed immediately that we had escaped from the prison, but nevertheless

directed us to a road that he assured us led to the river. The rest of the boys thought that he was trustworthy, but I had my doubts, and the farther we went the more certain I felt that he was going to turn us in.

We found the road, however, and huddled in the woods nearby to wait for darkness. It was less than an hour later that we heard the chilling cry of the bloodhounds. We broke from the woods and started for the river, but after half a mile it became obvious that the bloodhounds were rapidly overtaking us, so when we saw a house we sprinted for it, reaching sanctuary scant yards ahead of the dogs.

The man with the bloodhounds—the helpful fellow we had encountered shortly before—rode up to the door and demanded us. The owner of the house refused, saying that he would not turn us over to a pack of hounds, but promising to deliver us to the proper authorities the following day. He was a man of his word and, after giving us a good breakfast, marched us eight miles to Clarksville, from where we were returned to Camp Ford.

It was a bitter anticlimax after the hardships we had endured, and more misery followed—twenty-seven days of confinement in a wretched dungeon for attempting to escape. But then one morning a guard gave us the unbelievable news—that the war was over, the Confederacy had fallen, and we were soon to be free after all.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **The five men got out of the stockade by pretending to be**
 - A male nurses
 - B camp guards
 - C dying prisoners

2. **As a guide, the escaped men used**
 - A a stolen map
 - B a rusty compass
 - C the North Star

3. **The five men were surprised to find that the**
 - A Sabine River was flooded
 - B bridge over the river was down
 - C course of the Sabine had changed

4. **Crossing the river was especially hard for Tom because he**
 - A had been injured
 - B could not swim
 - C Neither A nor B

5. **The men drew lots to see who would**
 - A take the grapevine across the river
 - B stay behind to build a raft
 - C cross the river with Tom

6. **The author crossed the river on his**
 - A first attempt
 - B second attempt
 - C third attempt

7. **The five escapees believed that if they reached Arkansas they would be**
 - A relatively safe
 - B in their greatest danger
 - C free of all worry

8. **The author thought that the man they encountered near the swamp was**
 - A easily fooled
 - B sympathetic
 - C untrustworthy

9. **The five men entered the house because**
 - A they thought it was empty
 - B the dogs were on their heels
 - C a storm was breaking

10. **They were turned over to the authorities by the owner of the**
 - A house
 - B dogs
 - C Neither A nor B