

LINCOLN LORE

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"BILLY AND DICK" AT THE WHITE HOUSE

The fact that two invalid soldier boys, one sixteen and the other eighteen, lived at the White House for eleven days as guests of Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln seems not to have received much attention. If the printed account of the episode related by one of the boys can be relied upon, and there seems to be no reason to question it, Private Ralph O. Bates of Mansfield, Ohio and Private Richard King of Harrisburg, Penn. were guests at the Presidential mansion from April 28 to May 8, 1864, inclusive.

A book published in 1910 which apparently has had a very limited circulation entitled *Billy and Dick from Andersonville Prison to the White House** written by Ralph O. Bates referred to as "Billy," sets forth the interesting episode which may have influenced President Lincoln, General Sherman and many northern sympathizers more than has been acknowledged.

The story was apparently put in writing and thereby preserved for posterity by Bates as early as 1868 when he was a student at Ann Arbor, Michigan. At this time he was invited by General James A. Garfield, later to become President, to relate the facts of his dramatic escape from Andersonville Prison, at a convocation held in Cleveland. At this time the general decorated Bates with a pendant containing seven gold medals each bearing the name of a confederate military prison in which he had been incarcerated.

Space as well as discretion will not permit any reference to the harrowing experiences of the boys while at Andersonville Prison nor their almost miraculous escape. It is important to state that after they reached the Union lines, utterly exhausted, more dead than alive they were challenged by Picket Simeon Collins, Company D, Seventh Illinois Infantry. They were taken immediately to General Sherman. After hearing their story Bates recalls that the general's "face was flushed with excitement and anger, the veins on his forehead were swollen and his whole nervous organization was strung to its highest tension."

General Sherman asked the boys what he could do for them and Bates replied, "I should like to live long enough to see President Lincoln and then go home and die." The general replied, referring to Bates request to see the President: "You shall, you shall: Lincoln shall see you just as you are. . . . I want you to take especial care to tell your story to President Lincoln precisely as you told it to me." Bates continued his reminiscences, "We were ragged, filthy, covered with vermin, without hats, caps, shoes or a vestige of any kind of clothing except the rags remaining from the shirt and pants we had on when captured sixteen months before." General Sherman's last comment was, "Tell the President that his army was headed for Andersonville and would never halt while that hell-hole was in existence." The same Simeon Collins who was serving as sentry at the point where they entered the Union lines was ordered to accompany them. At Cincinnati, enroute to Washington, Dr. George Ross of Xenia, Ohio was brought in to see them and was so impressed by their need of medical attention that he accompanied them to Washington where they arrived at 6:30 A.M. April 28, 1864. They were taken to the White House by Collins and Dr. Ross almost immediately. After the President had greeted them cordially, he said, "Now, boys, tell me all about it. I want to hear your story. General Sherman has asked for a patient hearing of all you have to say. So tell me all about it."

After the interview was over, which greatly impressed the President, he inquired about "Dick's" people and found his father was killed at Fort Donelson and that his mother was Mary King of Harrisburg, Pa. He then

turned to "Bill" and inquired "who are you my boy?" Bill replied that he was "a son of Calvin Bates of Mansfield, Richland County, Ohio—Ralph Bates by name, and belonged to Troop H, Ninth Ohio Cavalry." General Sam Cary of Cincinnati was present and told Mr. Lincoln he knew "Billy's" father very well and was very complimentary in his remarks about Calvin Bates' service rendered to the Union cause.

According to "Bill," after Lincoln received this information he "sprang to his feet and started towards the door, saying, 'My God, when will this accursed thing end?'" It was at this moment that the President sent the following telegram to "Bill's" father and possibly one to Mrs. King but we have no copy of the latter if such a message was sent to her. Fortunately we do have a copy of the telegram sent to Calvin Bates:

Executive Mansion, Washington, D. C.
April 28, 1864

Calvin Bates, Mansfield, Ohio

Your son, Ralph Bates, of Troop H, Ninth Ohio Cavalry, has made his escape from Andersonville prison. He is in my care. I will send him home. Don't let him die.

Abraham Lincoln, President

It is quite apparent from the content of the telegram that "Billy" had told the President as he told Gen. Sherman about his desire to see the President and then "go home and die."

Collins, who had accompanied the boys from General Sherman's presence upon his order along with Dr. Ross who joined them at Cincinnati were now instructed by the President to have "Billy" and "Dick" taken to a hospital for a thorough cleansing and outfitting. As Billy put it, "After this transformation we were re-conveyed to the White House and put to bed." "Billy" further states that some time later Dr. Ross took them to another room to be weighed. Along with the President several other men had been brought in to confirm the procedure. Mr. Lincoln served as weigher and when "Dick" was weighed he remarked, "This man weighs sixty-four and a half pounds." "Billy" was then put on the scale and the President said, "This one weighs only fifty-nine and three-fourths pounds."

Three days later the boys "were carried into a large dining-room and propped up in chairs in front of the table, when President Lincoln came in and seated himself between us. Our breakfast consisted of beef-tea and boiled milk. There was nothing else in sight on the table." It is doubtful if so scanty a meal was ever served to guests at a White House meal, and it is to the credit of Mr. Lincoln that he shared the diet ordered for the boys by the doctor.

After "eleven days" as recorded by Billy, the doctor accompanied the boys to their respective homes. Lincoln's instructions were carried out by "Billy's" parents and they did not "let him die." When he was sufficiently recovered he again entered active service in the army and was ordered by Gov. Brough of Ohio to report to Gov. Oliver P. Morton of Indiana. He was appointed Second Lieut. in the 129th Regiment of Indiana Volunteers, was under fire in the battle of Kenesaw Mountain, and was mustered out of the service August 6, 1865 at Charlotte, N. C. He was married to Rozella E. Middleton at Middleton, Indiana. "Billy" died at Santa Cruz, California Dec. 29, 1909. No further information is available about "Dick" except that he passed away at Vineland, N. J., Oct. 9, 1890.

*Published by Sentinel Publishing Co., Santa Cruz, Calif., 1910. Copyrighted by Rozella E. Bates.