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Austin letters in University of Montana Archives show disillusionment with War

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is last in a two-part series dealing with a group of Civil War letters the University of Montana archives received recently for microfilming. All but one of the nine letters are addressed to the John Sargent family in Charleston, Ill., from recruit William Austin, whose family later moved to Montana. The first article dealt with the letters dated through the summer of 1861. The second article picks up Austin at Paducha, Ky., in the fall of 1861 and continues with him until he resigns in 1864. Quotes from Austin's correspondence are reprinted with original spelling and punctuation.

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state + cs + ht +AUSTIN LETTERS IN UM ARCHIVES
SHOW DISILLUSIONMENT WITH WARBy Rebecca Lee Yates
UM Information Services

MISSOULA, Mont.---

After his July 20th letter describing the theft of four mules in Missouri, William H. Austin's next recorded letter to John Sargent is dated September 9, 1861.

During that time, Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant had taken command of the troops at Cairo, Ill.

Grant, unable to get a position after receiving his commission in May, 1861, had gone to Mexico, scene of his most recent military experience during the Mexican War, and was there when, with surprise, he received word he had been unanimously recommended for the position of brigadier general in Illinois.

Grant first was ordered to Ironton, Mo., reaching there about Aug. 8. He then went to Jefferson City, Mo., and then, on Sept. 4, arrived in Cairo, which was to be his headquarters in the early part of the war.

The appointment of the controversial Grant had been made by Gen. John Charles Frémont, Western Department commander. Gen. Frémont was not one of the West Point "inner circle" and so judged Grant on his own terms -- rather than through the eyes of the army, which deemed Grant a drunkard and drifter who could not be trusted.

Moving into Cairo, Grant met Gen. Benjamin M. Prentiss at Jackson, Mo. Grant gave Prentiss orders to stop at Jackson but Prentiss took offense, believing himself the superior officer. "He had been a brigadier, in command at Cairo, while I was mustering officer at Springfield without any rank," Grant explains. "But we were nominated at the same time for the United States service...By virtue of my former army rank I was, by law, the senior."

Piqued, Prentiss left his troops at Jackson and reported himself at St. Louis, Mo. He subsequently was sent to another part of the state and was off duty while much of the fighting was going on in the West, until the Battle of Shiloh (April 6, 1862), when he showed remarkable courage.

On Sept. 3, 1861, the day before Grant arrived in Cairo, the Confederate Army, under Brig. Gen. Gideon J. Pillow, moved into neutral Kentucky soil, occupied the towns of Hickman and Columbus and was about to seize Paducah at the mouth of the Tennessee River.

Immediately after taking command from Col. Richard Ogelsby in Cairo, Grant began loading steamers with troops and arms to go the 45 miles from Cairo to Paducah. The Union troops took Paducah on Sept. 6. It is difficult to determine whether recruit Austin took part in the occupation of the crucial Kentucky town, but on Sept. 9, 1861, he writes:

"I have not been in camp since Saturday I have beenⁱⁿ/Ky three days last week and left Paducah last Saturday morning 3 o'clock I shall stay until Monday next."

In the same letter Austin relates:

"I witnessed the departure of the 8th Regiment this evening. destination Norfolk, Mo. they are it is thought by many going to have some hard fighting to do it is said there is 7000 Secesh fellows at the above named point if so they will see some hard times there is also 7 Regiments from Mo. Iowa and Ills with them making our force equal if not Superior to Pillows (Pillow). there is a great stir in the city to night with occasional cheers for the Union though many seem cast down quite a number of the boys of the 10th Regiment is cursing their officers on account of not getting to go."

Apparently Austin was referring to Norborne, Mo., where the battle of Lexington had been fought earlier. Of the 3,000 to 3,500 Union soldiers involved in that battle, 100 were killed and all the rest taken prisoner. The Confederates had had 18,000 men under General Sterling Price.

This defeat had come right on the heels of the Aug. 10 Confederate victory at Wilsons Creek, Mo., in which Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon was killed and his army driven into a long retreat. These shocking Union setbacks contributed to the relief of Frémont in November. He was succeeded by Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck.

The enforced idleness of many of the troops at Cairo, such as the 10th Regiment Austin mentions, indirectly led to a tactical defeat for Grant's army at Belmont, Mo. On about Nov. 1, Grant was ordered to make a demonstration on both sides of the Mississippi River. Rumors were that some 3,000 Confederates were about 50 miles west of Cairo. By this time, Grant's troops were very impatient and although the orders were muddled, Grant saw a chance to give his men some action.

Grant dispatched Col. Ogelsby with troops (probably including Austin), and he himself left Cairo with reinforcements on Nov. 6. He writes that he had not intended nor contemplated an attack, "but after we started I saw that the officers and men were elated at the prospect of at last having the opportunity of doing what they had volunteered to do-- fight the enemies of their country. I did not see how I could maintain discipline, or retain the confidence of my command, if we should return to Cairo without an effort to do something."

At Belmont, Grant and his troops were routed by the Confederate army under Pillow. Grant lost more than 600 men and accomplished nothing.

Austin was not to write from Cairo again until after the battle at Fort Donelson, Ky., the following year. Between his letters of Sept. 9, 1861, and Feb. 21, 1862, the men at Camp Defiance did nothing except prepare themselves for the long battle in Kentucky.

At the beginning of 1862, the Confederates occupied points along the Mississippi River from Columbus to Bowling Green and Mill Springs, Ky. These areas were strongly fortified, as were Forts Heiman, Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers near the Tennessee state line.

On Feb. 1, 1862, Grant received orders to advance upon Fort Henry and, with characteristic speed, started out Feb. 2, capturing the fort on Feb. 6.

"The victory of Fort Henry," Austin writes on Feb. 21, "I took an active part was among the first in the fort that is of the Infantry the gun boats man was the first to enter the fort..."

The fall of Fort Henry made Confederate Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston see his whole line in peril and he evacuated Bowling Green, sending 15,000 men to defend Fort Donelson. Grant started from Fort Henry to Fort Donelson on Feb. 12 and by the 16th had captured the fort, accepting nothing but unconditional surrender from his old friend, Confederate Gen. Simon Buckner. Fifteen thousand troops surrendered with Buckner.

In his Feb. 21st letter, Austin writes:

"I have went through hardships enough in the last six days to have killed me if I had been at home I was not in the hard fight on the 15th of this month having been exposed three days and nights being compelled to lay out in snow and rain without fire so that on friday I left the field but not until I was compelled to go by Sergean Phipps of our Regt then having 4 miles to go I did not get back Saturday morning until the time our Regt was ordered to retreat as their ammuniton was exhausted so I was only in the fight or skirmishes three days during which time I saw many of our boys killed and wounded.

"The loss in our Co. was 6 killed and 30 wounded."

The series of letters at this point shifts the scene of action further west. The next letter is not from Austin, but instead one written to Austin from a fellow soldier at Batesville, Ark., I.D. Moore, apparently one of Austin's old buddies. On May 5, 1862, Moore writes:

"I received your letter of the 5th whitch you sent by Thomas Devrick he has just come up to the regiment we have had a long & tedious march from ~~ketts:ville-Mo.~~ we stoped at Fort Sith Mo we onely staid their a fiew days....We have marched something better than 600 miles since we left Bolla we came here day before yesterday after marching between 35 & 40 miles..."

Apparently the march Moore describes is from Keytesville, Mo., to Rolla, Mo., to join (or as a part of) Gen. Samuel R. Curtis' troops, which had driven Gen. Sterling Price's Missouri State Guard out of Springfield, Mo., and chased them into Arkansas.

Curtis' troops were then stationed on the main road into southwestern Missouri when Gen. Earl Van Doren assembled his confederate forces and met Curtis' army at Pea Ridge, Ark., in March, 1862. In his advance, Van Doren managed to put the federal troops between his men and supplies and Curtis, swinging his army around, won a decisive victory.

But victory was not without its price. The battle was long and bloody. Moore described it in his May letter to Austin:

"You said that the trees are all torn to pices and you could gather the balles by the bushel at for Donelson if you had hav bene at plar (Pea Ridge) you could saw the same sight."

General Curtis, in a post war letter, also described the aftermath of Pea Ridge: "The scene is silent and sad. The vulture and the wolf now have the dominion, and the dead friends and foes sleep in the same lonely graves."

Both the commanding officers and recruits were disillusioned. Moore wrote:

"You wanted to know what I thought a bout solgering if it was any easery than farming...you wanted to know what I tought about fiting but I tell you it is no pleasant place to be to behold men all torn to pices by canon balles or shells..."

From the subdued tone of his late 1861 and early 1862 letters, Austin was feeling the same repulsion with the war.

It can only be speculated as to what happened to Austin from the battle at Fort Donelson until his last letter in 1864. He might have gone with Grant on the advance to Nashville. He might have been at the battle of Shilo or part of the 26-day advance on Corinth, ending April 29, 1862. And he might have been on the long, tedious march, from November to July, 1863, to gain Vicksburg, Miss.

All we know from the letters is that on July 16, 1864, he writes from the "quiet little town" of Helena, Ark., where he is on business for a few days before returning to Vicksburg(?):

"This I hope will answer my long silence since I last wrote you I have resigned and did intend to have been on my way to Mexico but have not got off yet but I think to start the first of Sept or Oct I should have come home on a short stay but have given that up and will go direct from VB (Vicksburg?) to NO (New Orleans?) I am stoping with Col T.A. Marshall, Poster Master of U B (V B, Vicksburg?)..."

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"There are some lovely ladies here but as I have lost all my former love for that class of God's creation I take the slightest interest in them and have nothing to say to them I have Declared my Independence and now only ask to be let alone.

"I am, John, Respectfully

W.H. Austin"

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