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A VERMONTER RETURNS FROM ANDERSONVILLE

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SOON after he was released on sick parole from Andersonville Prison, November 15, 1864, Sergeant Charles Ross of the Eleventh Vermont Volunteers embarked aboard the Union transport steamer *General Sedgwick* for Annapolis, Maryland. Thin, emaciated, extremely hungry, but exhilarated by his release and northward voyage, he wrote briefly to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. A. R. Ross of Lower Waterford, Vermont, informing them of his release and tentative plan to return home on furlough. He wrote his brother Aldace less than a fortnight later, after his arrival at the United States Hospital in Annapolis, with a retrospective view of his Andersonville experience as he reported upon the fate and condition of those of his company who came from Lower Waterford.

Neither of these letters survive in the original for comparison with Carl Ross's MS. Diary, the Andersonville Prison portion of which was published in *Vermont History* in July.¹ However, his mother copied the first letter in entirety and most of the second in her letters to his brother Aldace, to whom she wrote while he was visiting at Hull Prairie, Wood County, in northwestern Ohio. These letters also portray the reaction of Carl Ross's parents and friends to his release. The restrained emotions, grateful piety, maternal and paternal desire to act promptly to alleviate the suffering of their son, and the kindly interest in him exhibited by neighbors illumine the mentality and community spirit of Lower Waterford, to which Carl Ross would return for Christmas. Mrs. Ross's letters to Aldace illustrate the attitudes of the parents of Union soldiers on the farms and in the villages and small towns of the northern states during General U. S. Grant's siege of Richmond before General W. T. Sherman captured Savannah and invaded the Carolinas.²

While his mother was informing his brother and friends of his release, and two of the latter were traveling to Annapolis to call upon him, Carl Ross was busy with hospital life. He enjoyed his new issue of army clothing (for which he was obliged to pay) and the hospital fare. He welcomed new arrivals from Andersonville, wrote letters

for fellow patients, and heard the latest news from his battalion in the Army of the Potomac. The details of this experience, of how he secured his Christmas furlough, and of his return home are portrayed in unpublished sections of his MS. Diary which are reproduced here.³ The insight which these entries provide into the character and viewpoint of the Vermont soldier, and the added knowledge that they provide of hospital and army life make an interesting contribution to the history of Vermont during the Civil War.

Lower Waterford Nov 30th [sic] 1864

My dear Aldace,

We received the following yesterday, which needs no explanation.

[“] On Board Steamer

Nov 21st 1864

Dear Parents,

I am once more among the living—Am in the lines of civilization. Yesterday I came from the Rebs lines, after an imprisonment of five months lacking three days. We are undergoing the cleansing process and are not *starved* which is a new thing for me. My health is pretty good all save Rheumatism which I have tucked [sic] on to me pretty hard.

I am expecting to land at Annapolis Md. when I hope to obtain a furlough for a time we are not exchanged only paroled. I hope a letter will be waiting me at A. Direct to Parole Camp.

I have not time or chance to write much. Write me a long letter & all the news. My respects to all enquiring friends. When I get time I have some sad news to impart to some of our acquaintances.

Good bye. Write soon

Chas Ross [”]

The above was written with pencil enclosed in an envelope marked U. S. Christian Commission—Soldiers Letter, and mailed at Old Point Comfort Va. Nov. 25th. How soon he will get to Annapolis we cannot tell. Your father did think of starting this morning to go there to meet him but was not well, he may go tomorrow & may not, if we hear anything more of importance before he gets home will let you know. Have we not great reason to thank God for his goodness in preserving the dear boy? I cannot but regard it as a most signal answer to prayer. I hope we shall never forget to thank him for his great goodness in this respect as well as *many* others.

Your Father wrote you more than two weeks ago but has received no answer. Ginnie has also written but has not received answer. How are you getting on? and what have you made up your mind to do? Do you want any more money? if so let us know.

While I write Edward Griswold called to see us, his furlough is nearly out, is looking very well, says he will be at Annapolis next tuesday perhaps we shall send some things by him & your father not go or at least until we hear from Charles again. But whatever transpires we will let you know.

With much love
Your Mother

Lower Waterford D 5th

My dear Aldace

I hope before this you have received my letter informing you of Charles release from prison and the Check of fifty dollars (\$50). We have since received another letter directed to you.

But it contains some things relating to the other boys which their friends will want to see we conclude not to send the original one but I will copy such portions of it, as I have time before the mail arrives.

[“] U. S. Hospital. Sec 5, Ward E.
Annapolis Md. Nov 27th 1864

Dear Brother,

By the mercy of Him who rules all things I am once more allowed the privilege of penciling a few lines to you after a delay of over five months, during which time as you may suppose I have suffered for my Country as a prisoner of War. But thanks to a kind Providence I am once more released in the land of the living, and am gaining quite fast. My difficulty is Rheumatism only in my limbs caused by want of proper clothing when the cold weather began.

I am now in the Hospital at this place, in a good comfortable bed and get plenty to eat, which is a new thing for me. I am so thankful to think I am out of that prison that words fail to express my joy. I cannot begin to write all that I with thousands of other prisoners have been through. At the *last* there will be a terrible account for that *Rebel Crew* to render up. Out of thirty five thousand prisoners confined at Andersonville thirteen thousand have died, and a ballance of over fifteen hundred sick are left, or were before the exchange began. If I am lucky enough to get a furlough (which I fear I shall not be) I can then by word of mouth give you a more perfect history of a prisoner's

life. Should you hear any story no matter how strange or revolting you may believe it. Rough treatment does not begin to express half the suffering we have undergone. But by the kind care of Him who is our Father I am preserved, but our Co. have lost heavily. out of fifty seven captured on the 23d June last 30 have died, and I am sorry to say that I suppose that Henry Lackie is among the number. Warren Phillips at last accounts was not in danger though in hospital. I saw him the day before I left the Hospital at Andersonville and he was on the gain. Charles Hale was in Hospital but how it will turn with him is more than I can tell. I hope he will arrive home soon by some of the exchange boats.[7]

He then mentioned having heard how the 11th⁴ has fared since he was taken prisoner and adds ["I feel *now* as though I was in paradise.[7]

He wants you to write all the news about all the boys and girls. is able to write, and will answer all the letters he receives. Edward Lee & Griswold have gone to Washington & will go and see him so we shall hear just how he is by them. Your father may go out after we hear from them, if he can do him any good or help him to get home. he says he is barely skin & bones. I feel very anxious that he may be able to get home.

Be sure and write as soon [as] you get this

I want to know how you are getting along all about yourself, what you are doing, or intend to do. My Love to all the friends

Your Mother

P. S. Ginnie says tell Aldace to be sure & answer my letter.

Friday [November] 25⁵

It is very pleasant today the sea is as calm as can be. Looks almost like glass. We are not making as good time as usual as the wind is at our head. wish it were otherwise for I fear we shall hardly land today. The Bay⁶ is very smooth and sailing up is very pleasant. We are expecting to stop just outside the port and hope to get set all right tomorrow.

Saturday, November 26, 1864.

I find the living in this H-⁷ some different from what it was in Andersonville. Here I get all that I want and that that is good to, plenty of vegetables and meat. I also have a good bed. My lameness is not much improved yet, but hope it will mend soon. More men from S. have come in tonight.

Sunday 27

This has been a great day for the sick or convalescent in the Hospital at Annapolis. All that were able were ordered to be moved to Baltimore. I was marked to go but by the kindness of Lieut Macomber I am to remain. A very pleasant day. There is a fellow in this sec. from Iowa that is a regular fool for talking, I do believe. Have not got my clothing yet.

Monday 28

A little damp and cool this morning, but I hope no storm is brewing. get all I want to eat. Have written to Mr. Blanchard Mrs. White & Aldace, and am going to write another to J. S. Baxly. Am getting a little tired. The Lady nurse gave me two apples today, and I eat them I fear they are not going to set very well.

Tuesday, November 29, 1864.

Once more I am the owner of a decent suit of clothes. Today I drew a full suit, Pants, Coat, Over Coat, Shirt, Drawers and Shoes. Also Scap [cap?]. They say I am to pay for them, but I think I ought to get one suit for nothing. I wish I could get a Furlough. Have written two letters today.

Wednesday 30

One more pleasant day has passed away and I think I have enjoyed it pretty well. have been up and about nearly all day. Am feeling some better. My lameness is no worse I think. Have written a letter to Capt Austin asking for my description list. Hoped to get Lieut. Macomber Lent me \$12.00 today.

Thursday, December 1:

Again it is very pleasant and I have tried to enjoy it and gain strength too. Get all I want to eat and more too. Travel round a good deal. Feel a good deal better when I stir about. Saw John Gavegan & Jim. Ransom as they came off the boat today. Am glad to see the boys getting into our lines.

Friday, December 2, 1864.

Pleasant this morning. Went up to Ward and saw Grant Dana & Barker. found them quite comfortable and doing well. This afternoon it is raining & not very cold. Should not wonder but this storm was snow in Vt. Mr. E. Holebrook the State com. was in to see me this

afternoon says we are to get Furloughs. Have written two letters, one to Tom. Barkers wife for him & one to a miss in Buffalo thanking her for a Needle case.

Saturday 3

Another day has passed & gone I have enjoyed to the best of my abilities under the circumstances. Called on Lieut Macomber this morning for the first time. Found him at home and had a pleasant chat. Also called on Grant, Dana & Barker. found them comfortable. Serg. O. G. Chase has a Com. I am glad of it. He has been miss-used [*sic*] long enough. Hope I find him all right *when* I get to the Batl. Am expecting to be paid and get a Furlough of 30 days soon.

Sunday 4

Today I have had the privilege of attending Church & of partaking of the Lords Supper. May I be preserved to enjoy the same privilege with my own Church. Have written a letter to Mother a long one two sheets. Have also received a letter from Father which was very gladly received. Plenty of Prisoners. [torn] . . .

Monday, December 5, 1864.

Once more I take pencil to record the events of another day. Another load of Prisoners came today. Some pretty hard cases. Our Ward is nearly full. We have not a full corps of nurses so those on duty have plenty to do. Have bought me a blanket but was obliged to borrow money of Lt. M- They have taken our cards for some thing. What for I do not know. I understand we are to be sent to our own states.

Tuesday 6

E. P. Lee & E. F. Griswold called on me this morning. They are nearly direct from home. Say Father is nearly beside himself with joy to think I am alive. E. P. looks pretty tough and more as a man should look, than he did. A very pleasant day. My Rheumatism is quite as bad today and yesterday as it has been. Am in hopes to get a Furlough before long. Found Sawyer of our Bat. he is looking pretty well.

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Saturday, December 17, 1864.

By a turn of good luck I got my Furlough and am now on my way home. Am at the Sanitary Com. in Baltimore. Have had a good supper and feel pretty midling smart. My lets [*sic*] ache pretty bad but think

I can stand it as I am on my way home. Had a regular mob at A- to get my ticket, also had to pay full fare [illegible] which is not right.

Sunday 18

In the grate city of New York today. A widely different place from where I was one month ago. Then I was in the Rebs hands in the stoccade [*sic*] at Millan.⁸ Have had two very good meals which did not cost me so very high either. Shall go out on the cars tonight for Springfield. I hope to get home tomorrow. My lameness is no better than it was, I think Do hope I may be able to go back when my Furlough is out.

Monday 19

Arrived in Springfield last night about Midnight. Went to a Hotel and slept soundly till morning. Got a good breakfast and started for St. J.⁹ where I arrived about six in the eve. Shall stop with Cousin J -- tonight. Came up from the Depot with my bundle on foot and got pretty tired. My legs are going to hurt me tonight very bad.

Tuesday, December 20, 1864.

Very pleasant and cold this morning. Have plenty of calls. Mrs. Fairchild & Mrs. Varnham came up to hear of their husbands. Cousin Lyal with cousin J's team brought me home¹⁰ after dinner. Found the people at home all well and very much in joy to see me. I am glad to get home. My lameness is quite as easy as usual. Shall take a good wash with Aldace to help one [*sic*].

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Thursday 22

Quite a pleasant day. Aldace has been on the hill today and had pretty good luck. I am enjoying my eating at home very very much. It does seem as if Mother never did cook as well. I cam [*sic*] eat so heartily and not have it hurt me any. My lameness is not improving very much. Called on Grandfather & Grandmother.¹¹

1 XXV (Burlington, July, 1957), 229-245.

2 J. G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1937), pp. 550, 564, 566-571. The letters are reproduced by permission of Professor Charles W. Wright of Castleton, Vt., and Mrs. Bertha L. (Ross) Wright of Natick, Mass.

3 These excerpts are taken from the fourth volume of the MS. pocket Diary, with permission from Carl A. Ross, Grass Valley, California and Professor Charles W. Wright, Castleton, Vt.

4 Eleventh Vermont Volunteers.

5 Cf. *Vermont History*, XXV (July 1957), 244-245, for the entries of No-

vember 20, 22, and 23, 1864, which describe the beginning of Carl Ross's northward voyage on the "Steamer Gen. Sedgwick" to Annapolis.

⁶ Chesapeake Bay.

⁷ United States Hospital, Annapolis, Maryland.

⁸ Millen, Georgia.

⁹ St. Johnsbury, Vermont, immediately to the northwest of Lower Waterford.

¹⁰ In Lower Waterford.

¹¹ Sergeant Ross remained at home until after December 31, 1864, when the four volume of the MS. Diary ends.

