

### **Ben Vials and Tom Barnes on the March to Relieve for Ridgely**

Tom Barnes had never been very curious about Indians. By the time his family had moved to Indiana, the Shawnee, Potawatomi, and Miami were long gone. William Henry Harrison, Old Tippecanoe, had seen to that many years before. He knew that there were Indians in Minnesota but had never seen or talked to one, and no one near Glencoe that he knew had ever had any dealings with them. Until last week he had had no feelings about them one way or the other. Even after being told about the uprising and that his company would be fighting Indians, he could not work up much hatred against this unseen enemy. Now, however, he had become emotionally involved.

Company C had sent out skirmishers to guard the flanks of Colonel Sibley's advancing army. In this capacity Tom, along with Ben Vials and a dozen other men, had been advancing through the chest-high prairie grass alongside the road. The men walked in a line abreast with about fifteen yards between them. The stone chimney of a farmhouse stood halfway between Tom and the road, but the farmhouse itself had been burnt to the ground, as had the barn and other outbuildings. It was tough and slow going in the thick grasses, but Tom could see a cornfield just ahead, which would make the walking easier.

About twenty feet from the edge of the field, Tom's foot caught on something in the grass and he went sprawling forward on his face. The thick prairie grass cushioned his fall, so the only thing he hurt was his dignity.

"Gosh darn it!" Tom repeated several times as he floundered around looking for his rifle.

"What's the trouble, Private Barnes," he heard Ben call out. "Did the Injuns get you?"

"Naw, just a log, I guess," Tom called out, patting the grass with his hands in search of his weapon. He could hear Ben laughing as he approached, and started chuckling to himself, when his hand touched something large and soft. "My good Lord! Oh, my lord!" Tom shouted as he realized what it was. He had tripped over a human body.

"What is it Tom? Well, damn it all!" cried Ben as he reached his friend and saw the body.

It was a child, a girl perhaps eleven or twelve years-old. She had been shot in the back of her right shoulder. Her faded gray dress was caked

with dried blood, as was the grass beneath her.

“What are you men doing there?” called out Sergeant Lathrup, who was in command of the detail.

By now several other soldiers had joined Ben and Tom, and one of them called out, “There’s a body over here, Sergeant!”

“What do you think happened to the poor little thing, Sergeant?” asked Ben when Lathrup trotted over.

“Killed by the same redskins that burnt that their farm, wouldn’t you say?” answered the sergeant sarcastically.

“I mean, how’d she get way out here?” replied Ben with obvious annoyance.

“Hmmm, well, judging by the fact that she weren’t scalped, I’d say she was shot near the house, and run out here to hide. Bled to death afterwards, I expect.” The sergeant’s tone had lost its edge.

“We should bury her, shouldn’t we Sergeant?” asked one of the onlookers.

“Yes, I expect we should. Any vol—”

“I’ll do it,” said Tom softly. “I found her.”

“I’ll help him,” offered Ben.

“Very well, then. Do it by the farmhouse so her kin can find the grave, if any are alive. Alright men, form your line and move out. You two catch up to us when you’re finished.”

Tom reached down and picked up the body. It hardly seemed to weigh anything. “Find my rifle and bring it along, will you Ben?” said Tom as he trudged off toward the house.

“Sure Tom.”

Tom was already halfway to the house when Ben caught up to him. “What’s your all fired hurry?” “I just want to get this over with,” was all Tom would say.

They found a shovel near the burned-out barn, and Tom dug the grave while Ben fashioned a cross out of two partially burnt boards and some twine. After laying the child in a shallow grave and covering her with dirt, Ben hammered the cross into the ground with his rifle butt.

“Do you wanna say some words or should I?” asked Ben when they were finished. It was the first time either one of them had spoken since reaching the farm.

“I’ll do it,” replied Tom. He did not know girl’s name, or exactly what he should say, so he just recited the Lord’s Prayer. Then the two young

men headed silently back toward their unit.

It just did not make sense. Why kill a harmless little girl? Tom wanted to ask this out loud, but figured Ben wouldn't know any better than he did. Were the Sioux really that different from white men? Reverend Riggs had said that some of them were Christians, but no Christian could have done this. Or could they? \*

Until then the war and the army had been just an interesting adventure to Tom Barnes. Now that he had confronted true cruelty, Tom was left bewildered by it. He realized now, however, that he was part of a deadly serious business.

*\* Barnes had met Riggs on their way south to St. Peter. This short section was also deleted.*

