

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Chatham And The Civil War

First of two parts

by Spencer Grey

After the firing on Fort Sumter, the residents of Chatham immediately began holding public meetings to express support for the Union, to raise money, and to encourage volunteers. At the town meeting on July 22, 1862, it was voted to provide a bounty of \$200 to each volunteer and \$4 a month was pledged to each member of the families of enlisted men. The quota for Chatham during the Civil War was 232 men, but the town actually sent 264 men, among them Francis B. Rogers, whose journal of his time in the army is in the archives of the Chatham Historical Society.

On Nov. 5, 1862, Rogers' regiment was ordered to take the train to Boston and report to Boston Common, where they were presented their regimental flag. After enjoying what he refers to as a "beautiful collation provided by the good people of Boston," they said goodbye to their friends and fell in line to march to Baxter Wharf, where they boarded the steamship Merrimac. After being delayed for four days because of a powerful blizzard, the Merrimac weighed anchor and began its voyage south. In spite of being on their way to the battlegrounds, the soldiers had a pleasant trip and amused themselves by watching porpoises play around the bow.

Upon arrival at Morehead City, N.C., the troops were transferred to cattle cars and taken to New Bern, where they marched about a mile to their campground. When they had pitched their tents, they were instructed in their camp duties and were issued guns, ammunition, and other equipment that would be needed in battle. For the remainder of November they saw no action but drilled and foraged, with one squad bringing in three bulls from a nearby farm.

But on Dec. 13 his regiment was called out at 7:30 in the morning and advanced toward the sound of fighting. The roads were in such bad condition that a large number of soldiers fell out. He reports that "one man was killed on our side and quite a number of citizens began to follow them for protection." After six miles they reached their camp and began foraging for turkeys, pigs, chickens, and anything else available.

When he awoke on Sunday, Dec. 14, Rogers heard heavy firing ahead, and as he explains in his journal, the action picked up considerably: "...the enemy was retreating and falling back on Kingston, and there the fun began. Our regiment was drawn up in line and the 45th regiment was ordered to advance. We were told to get down flat on our arms. The battle lasted three hours, and 500 prisoners were taken, with some wounded on both sides. The Rebs sent in a flag of truce to give them a chance to get their women and children out of the town, but when we arrived there, the women and children were still in town, but the men were gone. We took possession of the town, and the boys visited the stores, but it being Sunday night, the keepers of the stores were out. The boys went in just the same and took such goods as they wanted, regardless of price. Some of the goods were heavy, as we could tell from the way they walked during the night and the next day, but the boys renewed their stock of tobacco."

During January and February of 1863, Rogers' regiment maintained a base near New Bern, from which they frequently went out on particular assignments. Once they cleared a road of trees that the enemy had felled to block the Union soldiers progress; another time they burned some bridges to obstruct the enemy; and once they were sent out to destroy a railroad and a bridge. The action apparently was limited, as they took time to erect a flag pole in front of their colonel's headquarters and to plant some trees along a street in the camp. In late February all the forces in and around New Bern were ordered to be inspected by General Foster, who was accompanied by "a sprinkling of ladies." For the same occasion they were detailed to help build a scaffold near the camp so that photographs could be taken overlooking the area.

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