Episode 904, Story 1 – Civil War Letters

Eduardo Pagan: This case asks what a young Union soldier’s letter may reveal about a bloody chapter in the American Civil War. By 1864, after three long years of Civil War, the tide is finally turning in the Union’s favor. In Virginia, General Grant’s army of the Potomac moves to surround Richmond. In Georgia, General Sherman pushes towards Atlanta. And in the west, a Union spear has been aimed at Texas, attempting to slice it from the Confederacy. Many of the Union soldiers in that Red River campaign are ex-slaves, now armed, they will confront their former masters in Arkansas during the Camden Expedition. It will prove one of the most vicious episodes of the Civil War. Now a couple from La Grande, Oregon have correspondence that they think may be an account of one man’s experience in this little known corner of the Civil War.

Ellen Campbell: We’d really like to know the story of the young soldier we discovered in these letters.

Eduardo: I’m Eduardo Pagan, and I’m starting my investigation with a few questions for Dale and Ellen Campbell.

Eduardo: Hi, I’m Eduardo from History Detectives.

Ellen: Come on in.

Eduardo: Thank you. Well, what can you tell me about these letters?
Dale Campbell: I purchased a group of philatelic materials; stamps and covers. And, Ellen and I, we discovered that there was an interesting story. Well, we have a letter here that was written by John Blackford to his brother.

Eduardo: John is a soldier, writing to William, who appears to be a politician.

Ellen: The envelopes are addressed to Mr. William D. Blackford, Senate Post, Washington, DC.

Eduardo: It sounds like John, the younger brother, is serving in the Civil War.

Ellen: There’s a reference down here to a skirmish with the rebels. And there’s an interesting passage in this letter that John wrote to William. Right here.

Eduardo: “You asked me in your last letter if I would be willing to accept a lieutenant’s or captain’s commission in a colored regiment.”

Ellen: Which I thought was kind of interesting.

Eduardo: Fascinating. The second letter to William is from another soldier, Amos Peck. It’s from later in the war and comes after some kind of battle. And, it says, “That your brother, John, was wounded and taken prisoner by the enemy and was alive and at Camden.” Do you have any idea who Amos Peck was?

Dale: I honestly don’t know anything about him.

Eduardo: The fate of the wounded John Blackford has haunted Dale and Ellen.
What would you like me to find out?

Dale: We’d like to know what happened to John. Why he was interested in a commission with the African American regiment, and we’re wondering if he survived.

Eduardo: Well, these are two envelopes and two letters that certainly appear to be specific to the period. John’s letter’s a little hard to read. The ink has bled through from the other side, but there are parts to this that I can make out. Dateline Springfield, June 22nd. But no year. The letter is a reminder of the tedium of an everyday soldier, and his hopes of promotion. He closes the letter by asking, “I hope you will succeed in getting my commission.” In my previous investigations of Civil War history, I don’t remember coming across a senator named William Blackford. If he’s not a senator, why would he have this address? I’m curious about the identity of John Blackford. He appears to have been reasonably literate. His literacy in itself would not be a determinate whether he was white or black, although, it does suggest that he may have been white, given that whites had more access to education. There is some reference to being down in Arkansas, and a skirmish with rebels in which thirty prisoners were captured. The middle initial, I can’t quite tell whether that’s an “E” or a “C.”

This is Amos Peck’s letter. Its dateline is “Camp, Second Kansas Cavalry, Clarksville, Arkansas, July 4th, 1864.” Again, Arkansas. It’s to William Blackford, and its mixed news. “Sir: I learned from a man near Camden, Arkansas in the month of May that your brother, John, was wounded and taken prisoner by the enemy and was alive.” Did John survive his wounds? But first, I want to find if he was commissioned in an African American regiment. The Wall of Honor at the
African American Civil War Museum and Memorial in Washington DC lists the names of 209,145 soldiers and officers who served in the United States colored regiments during the Civil War. Historian Hari Jones writes about African American contributions to the war effort. These are the letters that I told you about. Written by John C. Blackford. And over here, you'll see a reference to a commission in a colored regiment. I'm trying to investigate whether he actually got that commission and a little bit more about John Blackford.

Hari Jones: Most of the officers in the United States colored troops are European American officers.

Eduardo: Hari explains for most, becoming an officer meant higher pay and a higher station. But some abolitionists sought for commissions to fight for their ideals. Regardless of motivation, officers and soldiers in the 166 regiments of the United States colored troops often faced harsh treatment from the Confederate Army.

Hari: Jeff Davis, the president of the Confederacy, in December of 1862, issued a proclamation that said, quote, “These negro soldiers,” close quote, when they were captured they would be returned to slavery. If they couldn’t find their owners, they would simply be sold into slavery. And the officers, whether of European descent or African descent, would be indicted for inciting a servile insurrection, and if found guilty, executed. When the Civil War begins, it's not legal for men of African descent to join the Federal Army. July 1862, Congress passed the Militia Act, which gave President Lincoln the authority to receive men of African descent into the Federal Army.
Eduardo: Hari explains that many of the African American soldiers, who were former slaves, would join Union regiments passing through their region. This worked to the Union Army’s strategic advantage.

Hari: Now, these are mostly Southerners so they know the ground. So they do a lot of long range reconnaissance patrols. They do a lot of patrols just laying out the ground for routes of march. Also a lot of foraging.

Eduardo: Hari says such foraging was dangerous work, particularly when confronted with Confederate troops, who may have been their former masters.

Hari: They’re very angry, and you see a number of incidents where the African American soldiers, when captured as a prisoner of war, they will not be taken in as a prisoner of war. But instead are massacred. Executed.

Eduardo: Did John Blackford lead colored troops into battle?

Hari: If he did get his commission, his name will be on the Wall of Honor.

Eduardo: Alright, let’s see if we can do it. Hari explains how names are listed by state and regiment. Since we don’t know what unit John served in, it’s a stretch. We don’t find his name in the colored regiments for Arkansas or Kansas, but Hari has a database we can check.

Hari: And we get fifteen John Blackfords.
Eduardo: I see two John C. Blackfords. John C. Blackford, Confederate Cavalry. Second Battalion, Maryland Cavalry. That’s not our guy.

Hari: Our second John C. Blackford is a Union Cavalry, Second Regiment, Kansas Cavalry.

Eduardo: Amos Peck, who wrote our second letter telling us John had been wounded, was with the mostly white Second Kansas Cavalry.

Hari: Let’s see what we can get on John C. Blackford. Click his name. Union. Company H. Alternative name, John E. Blackford. So, this is more than likely our guy.

Eduardo: So John Blackford was white, and the database also reveals his military status.

Hari: Soldier’s rank in, private. Soldier’s rank out, private.

Eduardo: John never made officer, but did he survive his wounds? The Kansas Historical Society in Topeka has materials devoted to all the Kansas Civil War regiments. Hi, I’m Eduardo from History Detectives. Head of Reference Services, Lin Fredericksen, is caretaker of the society’s 50 million documents.

Lin Fredericksen: So, we’re looking for the enlistments in the Kansas Adjutant General’s Office for the Civil War. They’re going to be down here on six. Okay, here they are.
Eduardo: Lin says Dr. Virgil Dean, the editor of Kansas history, may be able to help me with run down information on John Blackford. Thank you very much for your help.

Lin: You’re welcome.

Eduardo: I’m investigating two letters that were written during the Civil War.

Virgil Dean: Let’s take a look at these enlistment records that Lin brought us. These are for the Second Kansas Cavalry. And we’ll see what we have here. Yeah, here we go.

Eduardo: Yeah! This is fantastic. From the town of Lawrence. His occupation was a blacksmith. And there’s a little bit more about his physical description. He had hazel eyes, dark hair, fair complexion, and, he was eighteen years of age! What can you tell me about William D. Blackford? Virgil says John’s brother, William, is a known figure in Kansas history.

Virgil: William D. Blackford came to Kansas Territory in about 1857. He was involved with the Free-State movement.

Eduardo: The Free-State movement wanted Kansas to ban slavery. William was a member of the legislature and eventually the private secretary to Kansas Senator, James Lane, in Washington DC. Well, that would explain why both of these envelopes are addressed to William Blackford at the Senate post office in Washington DC.
Virgil: Yeah. Exactly.

Eduardo: James Lane controlled the appointment of officers to Kansas regiments raised for the Union Army, including two colored units. But Virgil has no record of why John didn’t receive the commission. Well, this second letter mentions a campaign, or an event, or a battle of some kind near Camden, Arkansas. Do you know anything about that?

Virgil: Yeah. The Second Kansas was a part of the Camden Expedition, and John, apparently, was among those who was wounded in that battle that was a disaster for a large number of people, particularly the black troops who were involved.

Eduardo: The Camden Expedition was part of the Red River Campaign, a Union plan to destroy Confederate forces in Arkansas and northern Louisiana and help cut Texas from the Confederacy. Virgil says Peck’s letter most likely puts John in a battle at a place called Poison Spring. An expedition of Union soldiers foraging for food had been ambushed. Did John make it out alive? I’m meeting Arkansas Civil War historian Mark Christ at the site of the Poison Spring Battlefield, near Camden, Arkansas. Mark explains how on April 18, a forage party loaded with food and supplies was making its way back to Union fortifications at Camden.

Mark Christ: There were a 198 wagons in the wagon train, and each one of them would have pulled by two to four horses or mules. So the wagon train would have stretched a mile or longer.

Eduardo: Just five miles into their return trip, they rode into a Confederate trap.
Mark: When they reach this approximate location, they run into a division of Arkansas troops that’s spread across the road, up there, blocking them from going to Camden.

Eduardo: The Arkansas forces were backed by a division of Texas and Missouri troops and a brigade of Choctaw and Chickasaw fighters. Members of these tribes had joined the Confederacy in 1861 after a joint treaty gave them title to their lands in return for their military support.

Mark: The Confederates open fire. The batteries catch the First Kansas in a crossfire and start cutting them to pieces.

Eduardo: Over 3,500 Confederate soldiers face-off against fewer than 1,200 Union fighters. Mark says this federal force included men from the Second Kansas Calvary, and among them was John Blackford.

Mark: Colonel Williams orders the First Kansas Colored rush to the front of the wagon train. The First Kansas know they’re in a desperate situation. They open fire with buck and ball, and they fight off that initial charge.

Eduardo: The Confederates charge again and once more the Union troops hold them off. But Brigadier General Samuel B. Maxey ordered a third attack.

Mark: The Union troops couldn’t hold anymore. The First Kansas started to break up. And they fell back toward the rear of the wagon train. This area right here
would have been covered with dead and dying men, hit by cannon fire, rifle fire. We are standing on hallowed ground.

Eduardo: The Union soldiers retreat through a swamp just past these woods. And the survivors reach Camden that night. What happened to the wounded who were left here?

Mark: For the First Kansas Colored Infantry, the real nightmare began after the battle.

Eduardo: Mark says the 29th Texas Calvary and the Indian brigade enacted vengeance upon the First Kansas Colored Infantry as payback for a battle they lost the previous year. And some of the Arkansas troops knew several of the First Colored Kansas Infantry from when they were slaves.

Mark: As the Confederates approached through the battlefield, they shot any wounded men that they saw. If you were an African American soldier wounded, it was very unlikely you would have survived this battlefield.

Eduardo: The Peck letter references John being wounded and taken prisoner. What might have happened to him then?

Mark: As a white, wounded soldier, he probably would have been picked up along with the Confederate wounded and taken to a building somewhere in the area that would have served as a hospital.
Eduardo: Mark says he’s brought some “after action reports.” They’re filled out by all officers after a military engagement.

Mark: First, we have a report from Lieutenant Barnett Mitchell, who was in command of the Second Kansas cavalry. He has a list of his killed, wounded and missing, and among the missing is...

Eduardo: John Blackford.

Mark: Yes. Now, check out the next one.

Eduardo: Then Mark shows me one more group of documents. It’s a detail about John Blackford that I’m eager to show the Campbells. This is a copy of his enlistment. And it tells you a little bit about who he was. He was eighteen years of age when he enlisted. And he was a blacksmith by profession. Then I tell the Campbells I tracked John to the battle Amos Peck wrote about, and I show them the report from John’s officer. And here, where he lists some of the missing is John Blackford, Company H. Now, this next document was a document that then answered the question. Muster roll for John E. Blackford. Dated November/December 1864, but here he’s listed as killed in action at Poison Springs. What accounts for the different reports?

Mark: They just didn’t know what had happened to John.

Eduardo: Mark explains that records were only changed from “missing” to “killed” when someone reported seeing the death.
Mark: We have to assume that he died of his wounds. And the Confederates then notified the Federals that he had passed away and his status was changed to killed.

Ellen: Well, I'm glad to hear the results. But I'm sad to hear the results of the story. We hoped that based on this letter, that he might have survived the war.

Dale: It seems like his intentions were very admirable and kind of substantiated, you know, his sincerity about the whole thing. So I think that's pretty neat.

Eduardo: The Red River Campaign marked the last decisive Confederate victory of the Civil War. On the Union side, over 8700 men were lost, and critics blamed the diversion of soldiers, supplies, and resources to this western front for prolonging the end of the war. The defeat led to a congressional investigation spearheaded by Kansas Senator James Lane. According to newspaper accounts, Lane called Red River “the most ill-advised and foolish movement of the war.”