

**Next Meeting  
August 26th  
At The  
Rose Center  
6:00 PM**

# Southern Heritage

**Bradford / Rose Camp # 1638**

**August 2006**

**Volume 14, Issue 7**

We have all been quite used to everything that is Confederate happening in places afar. We are, after all, located in what some consider to be a backwater area. Thankfully, this is no longer as true as it once was. We East Tennessee Confederates are, finally, coming into our own. Events like the upcoming battle of Morristown and Bethesda Days are hallmarks of the growing participation from our area. The interest the public showed for Dan Patterson's presentation on General Longstreet is another indicator that you really can be gray in the shadow of the Appalachians. Happily our camp is at the front of these trends.

DEO VINDICE

*Larry W. Watkins*

We have two pressing items on the horizon.

First, membership dues are due once again. Please contact camp treasurer Bill Henderson and renew your membership. Let's make every effort to avoid the dreaded "overdue" condition. Remember, Bradford - Rose Camp and the SCV need each and every one of you.

**Second, this will be the last regular meeting before the upcoming**

## Camp News

**"Battle of Morristown at Historic Bethesda Days" on September 22-24.**

There is still a great deal of work to do before this event. So, we need as many members as possible available at this meeting. Be prepared for one, or more, work days to be scheduled. This is an outstanding opportunity for our camp to make a good impression on the public.

Speaking of good impressions, we had our usual good time at the Forrest Picnic at Bethesda Church. There was, as always, plenty of fine southern cooking. H. K. Edgerton showed up, so you can be sure that things stayed lively. If you weren't there, you missed a great afternoon.

**Don't forget to get those Dues in!**

## Heroic Deed of James Keelan

The following story was published in the Confederate Veteran Magazine in 1895. A copy was supplied to us for the Newsletter by Bill Henderson. Thanks Bill.

Announcement has been made that the June Veteran would contain a thrilling account of the brave deed of James Keelan in defending the bridge at Strawberry Plains, early in the war. It was intended to make extracts from the pamphlet account by Radford Gatlin, author of the "Confederate Spelling Book" and "Reader," but Mrs. Sarah Stringfield Butler, of Nashville, Tenn., editor of Woman's Missionary Advocate, who, with her husband, then lived near the bridge, furnished a vivid account of it which is given precedence.

Mr. Keelan was in the employ of Mr. Butler at the time during the day and of the railroad com-

pany at night, and there is perhaps no one who could give a more authentic account of his deed. Mrs. Butler writes that the pamphlet history "contains the facts" in regard to the successful defense of the bridge, but it is written "in such a bombastic style that even the truth does not appear true."

Confederate troops had been stationed there from time to time to protect the bridge, as this was an important strategic point, but the cry of "wolf! wolf!" had been so often sounded, and the Confederate forces were needed so badly at other places, that all had been withdrawn, only one watchman being employed to guard the bridge, and that at night. His box or bunk was on the Strawberry Plains side of the river.

James Keelan was that man. He was small in stature, with a ruddy complexion, blue eyes and light brown hair. He was un-

educated, but simple hearted, brave, and as true to his friends as he proved to be to his country. He had a wife and three children at that time.

The end of the bridge was but a short walk from the fence that enclosed the old homestead of Maj. Stringfield, then occupied by Mrs. Stringfield, his step-mother, and his sister, Miss Mary Stringfield, now Mrs. J. E. Ray, of Asheville, N. C. Mr. F. A. Butler and family lived not far distant. On the evening in question, Maj. Stringfield had reached home on furlough from Virginia, and Mr. Butler and wife were at his home until after ten o'clock. The night was cool and frosty, and the clouds obscured the moon almost entirely.

About midnight Mr. Butler was awakened by a messenger who said an attempt had been made to burn the bridge; that Mr. Keelan was badly wounded and was at Mr. Elmore's house. Mr. Butler

Heroic Deeds Cont.

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Dates to Remember see Page 2

## Upcoming Dates to Remember!

**Our August  
Monthly Meeting  
will be on August  
26th at the Rose  
Center.**

**For the September  
Monthly Meeting  
we will be  
attending the  
“Battle of  
Morristown” at  
“Historic Bethesda  
Days” September  
22-24 at Bethesda  
Church.**

**Dues Are Due**

## Heroic Deed of James Keelan continued

went to him immediately, and when the physician, Dr. Sneed, arrived, he assisted in dressing Keelan's numerous wounds. He then learned from Mr. Keelan all the circumstances as they occurred, and after "the cruel war was over" he talked with the leader of the attacking party, several of his men, and also with Col. Wm. Carter, of Carter County, who was the projector of the whole movement.

Col. Carter was employed by the U. S. Government to destroy all the bridges from Hiwassee River at Charleston, Tenn. to Bristol, and was paid not less than ten thousand dollars. Men in each neighborhood were employed for this purpose and the 8th of November was appointed as the time for a simultaneous attack. Mr. Wm. Pickens led the party of fifteen men who attempted to burn the bridge at Strawberry Plains. About midnight they reached the bridge. Keelan was in his bunk close under the end, two feet above the abutment of the pier, and that was four or five feet from the ground. His gun was in a rack above his head, but he did not have time to take it out when he heard the men approaching. One of them jumped up on the pier and began to light the pine splinters. When it blazed, Keelan fired his old single barrel pistol, and the man tumbled to the ground. Keelan was then fiercely attacked by as many as could get around him, some striking with heavy knives and other shooting. He resisted manfully, defending himself the best he could, but it was impossible as he was too far above them to use his small dirk.

As soon as the first shot was fired Miss Stringfield made a light in her room which overlooked the scene, and went into the yard. Seeing the light, the men hastened away, believing that Keelan was dead. As soon as they left, Keelan rolled himself to the ground and crawled quietly beyond Stringfield's house, not knowing that Maj. Stringfield had reached home that night, and fearing to alarm the two women whom he believed to be alone. When he reached Mr. Elmore's gate he

called him, resting his hand on the fence. Mr. Elmore saw it, and exclaimed: "Jim, you've been drunk or asleep and let the train run over you."

Keelan replied: "No, Billy; they have killed me but I've saved the bridge."

He was taken in the house at once and friend and physicians sent for. His head was cut open six or seven inches, and the brain was oozing from the dreadful gash; his left hand was cut off an hanging by a shred of skin. The right hand was also badly cut. He was in such close quarters during the time of the fight that he could use his gun only as a sort of shield, and that was hacked in several places. He was shot at many times, but only one bullet pierced his flesh.

When Dr. Sneed wished to cut off his hand smoothly, he said: "No, no, I can rest a gun against that stump." He was nursed carefully, but his recovery was wonderful.

The old pamphlet account by Radford Gatlin quotes Mr. Keelan, after reporting their approach, says:

"I did not stop to count them. I think, from the appearance of the crowd, there were about fifteen. I had to be quick, for the fellow was just about to place the torch between the scantling and weatherboarding. I could have touched him with my single-shot pistol. I put it very near him and shot him in the right breast as he was in a position quartering to me. Off he tumbled to the ground among the crowd below; the torch was knocked out by the fall, and all was dark again. It was very dark, and I could only see dark forms approach me, so I continued to carry my left arm up and down to shield my head and face until I heard the crack of a bowie knife on the brace over my head, and then I grabbed him with my left hand and thrust my dirk into him with my right arm. As I drew it out of him, off he tumbled to the ground among the crowd. \* \* \* \* 'At him again,' said one of their number; 'let me at him and I can fetch him,' using an oath. I was sensible that I was wounded, as the blood was running over my

mouth and it made me feel savage as the fourth fellow came at me, and I wanted to get him. I made a quick grab and caught him by the cap, which slipped off and I went back hard against the weatherboarding, and in the rebound I came near falling out of my box. It was then the rascal cut off my left hand and split open my head, but, at the same time, I poked it into him and he got the steel good. They now commenced shooting and retreating. I tried to use my rifle, but could not lift it. I did not know until afterwards that they had cut off my left hand and shot me in the right arm."

Mr. Butler has a vivid recollection of the event. He had warning of the danger from bridge burners; he had gone to see Gen. Zollicoffer and had secured the promise of a detail of Lieutenant with twenty men, but Mr. Branner, President of the East Tennessee railroad, induced The General to suppose that Mr. Butler and his friends were unduly alarmed, and he had failed to furnish the guard as promised.

Soon after the tragic event Mr. Butler secured subscriptions amounting to \$1,600, bought a good farm of ninety acres in the country, but Keelan was not satisfied there. He became very fearful that his life was in jeopardy and he staid with Maj. Stringfield's command in the army for a year or so. Subsequently, his little farm was sold and a smaller place was purchased near Bristol, where he died a few months ago. Comrade A. S. McNeil, of Bristol, has acknowledged gratitude of the VETERAN for his zeal in behalf of honor due the faithful Keelan.

No wonder Keelan's courage went down after the awful night when, with his own blood and brain flowing over his face and mouth, he felt he had given his life for the South. He had no negroes to fight for, he afterward realized himself a cripple, almost helpless, and that the bridge did not remain "saved."

Tennessee and Virginia might well unite in building a monument to his heroism and locate it at Bristol on the state line.