
VOICES OF THE PAST

THE MEMOIR OF JOHN D. LAWALL

PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION

1899

The following excerpts are from the memoir of John D. LaWall, a Soldier who served with the U.S. Volunteer Infantry during the Philippine Insurrection. LaWall's type written memoirs are included with his other papers in the Spanish American War survey collection at the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA.

The transcriptions below are taken from the copies in the USAHEC collection, and are presented unedited and as unchanged as possible. As with all transcripts there is the possibility of error.

Ah flung mah hat in the cornah
Ah hung mah coat on the wall
Ah went up to de recruitin' awfice
Dis cruel wah!

--Anon.

Sixteen Months in The Philippines

There is a time in the life of nearly every boy when he is obsessed with the desire to become a soldier. Some boys delight to read of great battles, they are never so happy as when they are in the possession of fire-arms, and they regard the Fourth of July as the holiday of holidays. They are thus cultivating, unconsciously, their warlike propensities; so when they have an opportunity later on in their lives practically to demonstrate their tastes, they sometimes take advantage of it by enlisting. But nothing takes the romantic ideas out of a boy's head so thoroughly as eating moldy bacon and hardtack, and nothing dampens his enthusiasm for the glamor and glitter of war so much as lying all night in a heavy rain fighting mosquitoes.

In the summer of 1899, I was greatly impressed by the opportunity of travel, adventure and experience offered by joining one of the thirty new regiments which were being organized for service in the Philippines. So strongly did the desire to go and see for myself what these islands and their people were like, and to participate in such an unprecedented war, take possession of me, that I determined to enlist. My first attempts to join Uncle Sam's army were rather discouraging. I was twice rejected at Rochester, New York, because apparently I did not possess the physical requirements. Before giving up, I decided to make one more effort, and as a result managed to pass the physical examination at Elmira, New York; and on July 25 1899, at the age of fifteen years and five months, I was duly sworn in to "uphold the honor and flag of the United States against all her enemies whomsoever."

On the next day, eight of us, all raw recruits except one who had served in the Spanish-American War during the previous summer, were sent to Camp Meade, Pennsylvania.

My experience on this first journey in Uncle Sam's service were far from pleasant; for , yielding to the advice and persuasion of my companions, who were all celebrating their enlistment, I was induced to smoke my first cigar with them. They assured me that it was not strong, that it was indeed very mild but to this day I believe that it was a veritable "stogie." At any rate, for fifty

miles, much to the enjoyment of my comrades, I suffered all the symptoms of a malady which I was to undergo later on, namely, seasickness.

It was nearly six o'clock when we reached Camp Meade; and as we marched up the principal street we found ourselves keeping time to the cries of "Left-left-he-had-a-good-home-and-he-left-etc." the distance from Elmira to Camp Meade is about two hundred miles, and a ride of that distance to eight healthy young fellows who have dined on sandwiches is conducive to a good appetite; so, after we had been issued our blankets and tin mess kits, we began to look around for something with which to fill our aching voids, thinking that full stomachs would help to give us a philosophic view of our situation, but all we could get "to take for our appetites" was a decoction resembling burned tomato juice with black charred particles floating in it. This preparation, the like of which I had never seen before, the cook designated as "Ki-Ki" soup. He assured us that we were "damned lucky to get that."

In due time, we finished this sumptuous meal and retired to our tents, and just about that time, let me tell you, more than one of us began to think of "mother, home and biscuits." Our reflections that first evening in camp would probably have been of a homesick nature, had not our spirits been livened by the vocal music rendered by an impromptu glee club.

When we had listened to Irish ballads, popular songs and national airs, and had witnessed clog dances and Irish jigs to our hearts' content, we concluded that camp life was not so uninteresting as it might be. One plaintive song sticks in my memory.

"After the din of the battle's roar,
Just at the close of day,
Wounded and bleeding upon the field
Two dying soldiers lay.
One thought of mother at home alone,
Feeble and old and gray.
One of the sweetheart he'd left in town,
Happy and young and gay
One kissed a ringlet of thin grey hair,
One kissed a lock of brown,
Bidding farewell to the stars and stripes,
Just as the sun went down."

I have often wondered why ninety per cent of the songs and ballads of the "Mauve Devada" from 1890 to 1900 had such sad plaintive themes. If ragtime and jazz did us no other service, they at least introduced a cheerful vein into our popular music.

We very soon found that our troubles were by no means over. At bedtime, although the greater part of the camp was furnished with sacks filled with straw upon which to sleep, we found that we had arrived too late to have our beds filled and as a result had to sleep upon the plank floors of the tents. This does not sound so badly, when you say it quickly, but in reality, it was very uncomfortable way of enjoying a night's repose. I thought at the time what I was undergoing one of the greatest hardships of my life, but, later, while lying on the uneven soil of Luzon, with "the stars for my tent," I often longed for a smooth a bed as that plank floor. But one small tent was allowed for three men consequently we were packed together pretty snugly. The sight of three men lying so closely remained one of that conundrum, "when he slept with his forefathers." While we didn't sleep with our forefathers, we were closely crowded.

The sea was pretty rough on the morning of the 21st, and it was not long before many of us began to notice a very unpleasant sensation in our stomachs coupled with a strong desire to feed the fishes. A troop ship is a poor place for a seasick soldier to look for sympathy, for when with dizzy head and rebellious stomach he can stand the rocking and pitching of the vessel no longer and makes a rush for the rail, he is greeted with such yells of derision and such admonitions of "go it, Jack, good for you!" that he thinks all his comrades must be unfeeling brutes.

A favorite question to put to a seasick comrade is, "wouldn't you like a piece of fat bacon tied to a string and drawn up and down your throat?" However, as nearly everyone has to undergo this seasickness, it is probably a good thing that a little fun can be derived from so disagreeable a source. The bunks were arranged in tiers of three, two bunks on a tier. When there is a great deal of seasickness, it is always good policy to secure a top bunk!