

Junius and Albert's Adventures in the Confederacy: A Civil War Odyssey
by Peter Carlson
Available in hardback, paperback, Kindle and Nook editions

Reviewed by Jim Powers

“Soon the great battle would begin, and Browne and Richardson were determined not to miss it. They’d seen many battles but they’d missed others ...” – opening lines from *Junius and Albert's Adventures in the Confederacy*.

Albert Richardson and Junius Browne were reporters for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, members of the war’s self-styled Bohemian Brigade. In May of 1863 they found themselves with the Union army at Milliken’s Bend, 25 miles north of Vicksburg. General U. S. Grant was 50 miles south of Vicksburg at Grand Gulf – finally on the right side of the Mississippi River – and was preparing to move against the Confederate forces.

Not wanting to miss the fun, the two intrepid reporters hitched a ride on a hay barge going down the river – part of the system of supply boats making nighttime runs past the Confederate cannon on the Vicksburg bluffs. However, luck was not with the reporters that night. The tug towing their hay barge was blown up by Rebel fire, and their barge made a wonderful target, drifting slowly down the Mississippi.

Browne and Richardson threw a couple of hay bales into the water and jumped in after them, hoping to ride their improvised flotation devices out of the danger zone, make to shore and walk to Union lines. Unfortunately, the pair was picked by a Rebel boat before reaching land – and their lengthy stay as “guests” of the Confederacy began.

As prisoners of war, the pair traveled from Vicksburg to Jackson, Mississippi, to Montgomery, Alabama, to Atlanta, Georgia, and then to Richmond, Virginia. After eight months in Richmond’s Libby Prison and Castle Thunder Prison, Browne and Richardson were shipped to another Confederate facility in Salisbury, North Carolina.

Escaping in December of 1864, along with other prisoners, they made their way across the Appalachian Mountains to Union lines near Knoxville, Tennessee, with the help of Union sympathizers and Southern slaves all along the way.

This book is populated with a great cast of characters:

Prison officials who let prisoners have all the comforts – as long as they could pay.

The warden of Castle Thunder Prison – a former pirate and soldier of fortune, now just a greedy bureaucrat. Captain George Washington Alexander also had been a playwright, poet, songwriter, actor, escaped convict, and a U. S. Navy officer for 13 years.

Colonel Abel Streight, a Union cavalry officer who mounted a raid into Confederate territory at the same approximate time as that of Colonel Benjamin Grierson – but with almost comic results. Mounted on mules, Streight’s command was no match for the swift horses of General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Robert Ould – the Confederate prisoner exchange agent. He refused to exchange Richardson and Browne, saying “Let them suffer.” Ould possibly nursed a grudge against because in 1859 newspapers ridiculed him when he was Washington, DC’s district attorney, saying that he was inept in his prosecution of Congressman Dan Sickles’ murder trial.

The Heroes of America, part of a North Carolina peace movement.

Dan Ellis, the legendary “Old Red Fox,” – famous for guiding men across the mountains to Union lines.

And the enigmatic Melvina Stephens – a beautiful teenage girl who acted as a guide, messenger, and spy for the North Carolina Unionists.

All in all, a delightful book that takes the reader along a different path of Civil War history. Junius and Albert and their fellow escapees had few qualms about knocking on the door of a North Carolina slave cabin being fairly sure they would meet with people whose loyalty to their masters did not include turning in escaped prisoners.

The book also tells of those who were “lying out” – Southern deserters and draft dodgers, men not in sympathy with the Confederate cause, who slept in the woods to avoid donning a uniform.

Much of the primary source material came from the writings of Richardson and Browne who, you must remember, were newspapermen in an era where getting the story in print first often was more important than being burdened by presenting factual information. Browne himself wrote an entirely fictionalized account of the Battle of Pea Ridge from a remote location, based on sketchy army reports and rumors in order to scoop a rival New York newspaper.

As author Peter Carlson puts it: “It was unethical, or course, but hardly unprecedented. Journalists in the nineteenth century were not finicky about facts and did not permit them to ruin a good story. Newspapers routinely enlivened their meager supply of facts by garnishing them with rumors, exaggerations, political rants, vicious invective, and the kind of pseudo-poetic prose that escaped the gravitational pull of truth and soared into fantasy. During the Civil War, reporters routinely made soldiers’ dying words sound as lofty and eloquent as a Shakespearean soliloquy. The dead soldiers never complained, nor did their kin.”

According to Carlson, a popular slang expression of the day was “He lies like a newspaper.” You probably shouldn’t believe everything you read on today’s internet either.

Junius and Albert’s Adventures in the Confederacy suffers somewhat by not having an index. However the chapter-by-chapter notes on sources are fairly extensive.

Thanks to RMCWRT member Gary Mitchell for bringing this engaging book to my attention.

If you’d like to learn more about the people, incidents and practices touched on in this book, here are a few suggestions:

Four Years in Secessia by Junius Browne

The Secret Service, The Field, The Dungeon, and The Escape by Albert Richardson

Three Years with Grant by Sylvanus Cadwallader

Bohemian Brigade by Louis M. Starr

A Bohemian Brigade by James M. Perry

The North Reports the Civil War by J. Cutler Andrews

Libby Prison Breakout by Joseph Wheelan

George W. Alexander and Castle Thunder Prison by Frances H. Casstevens

Bushwhackers by William R. Trotter

Mountain Partisans by Sean Michael O’Brien

A South Divided by David C. Downing

The Civil War in North Carolina by John G. Barrett

Lost Love by George Cooper – an account of Richardson’s doomed romance with a recent divorcee whose former husband murdered him.