

THE STRUGGLE OF '76.

Address Delivered at Red Shirt Reunion at Anderson, August 25th, by Senator B. R. Tillman.

Continued.

Judge Aldrich last night gave us a general outline of conditions during the radical regime. You have just listened to Governor Sheppard's eloquent portrayal of the dangerous events which transpired in our state capitol when the final struggle for mastery culminated. I propose now to go somewhat into detail and give you particulars as to one of the most notable events of that struggle and one which caused the greatest stir in the state and throughout the country. I will narrate the events in which I was an eye-witness.

My recollection of those occurrences has recently been verified by others who saw the bloody tragedy. Altogether in 1874 and 1876 I was a participant in four race riots. All of these were most potent influences in shaping the conflict between the whites and blacks and producing the gratifying result which brought the white man again into control of his inheritance.

The Hamburg Riot.

Judge Aldrich told you last night that he could tell more about the Hamburg riot than I could because he would not have to criminate himself. As for that I have nothing to conceal about the Hamburg riot. I told the republicans in the senate that we had to shoot negroes to get relief from the galling tyranny to which we had been subjected and while my utterances were used in the republican campaign book for 1900, I think my very boldness and the frankness with which I explained conditions did more to enlighten and disarm the fanatics than anything else I could have said. Even Senator Hoar was so impressed that he became my warm personal friend.

Because of its potent influence in arousing the white men of the state to their duty I shall give you the story of the Hamburg riot in full, not dealing at this time with the two Ned Tennant riots and the Ellenton riot.

The third of these disturbances or riots occurred at Hamburg in July, 1876, and this tragic episode in the struggle for white supremacy caused more widespread comment throughout the north and was more far reaching in its influences upon the fortunes of the white people of South Carolina than anything of the kind which ever occurred in the state. Congress appointed an investigating committee to take testimony and the bloody shirt was waved by the northern press and politician from one end of the country to the other. The two preceding disturbances of which I have spoken, while causing great excitement and uneasiness, had resulted in no bloodshed other than the wounding of two negroes near Dr. McKie's, but the Hamburg riot caused the death of seven negroes and one white man, while two negroes and another white man were seriously wounded.

The cause of the trouble as in the two Ned Tennant riots was the negro militia. The town of Hamburg, opposite the city of Augusta and thirteen miles below where I was born and reared and was then living, had been a prosperous mart of trade between 1840 and 1860. At one time it had a population of between 3,000 and 4,000 and did an immense business with the South Carolina planters. Owing to its liability to overflow by the Savannah river it had begun to decline and at the time of which I write it was occupied almost entirely by negroes. The white population consisted of a few families. The number of stores was small. The negro population in 1876 probably numbered 1,200 and it had become an harbor of refuge for all of the cow thieves, cotton thieves, house burners, and other types of criminals among the negroes. Owing to the fact that the municipal government was composed of negroes, the town marshal was a negro, Gen. Prince R. Rivers, an ex-Union soldier, commander of the negro militia, State Senator from Aiken county and Trial Justice, lived there and the negroes were exceedingly insolent and it was dangerous for white men to go through the town unless they were well armed. A negro militia company of about one hundred men had been organized in this lawless den and one Dock Adams was captain. On the afternoon of the 4th of July, 1876, this company was drilling and parading on Main Street and as was usual a very large proportion of the negro population were admiring spectators. A young man, Thomas Butler, whose father lived on the high hill two miles away, returning home from Augusta whither he had been on business found the street blocked by the negro militia company. The militia were marching "company front" and the line extended from sidewalk to sidewalk. As young Butler approached, instead of throwing his men into "column of fours" or "column of platoons" or wheeling them out of the way Dock Adams gave the order to "charge bayonets" with the view no doubt of showing off before the assembled negroes and to compel the young white man to turn his horse around and flee. But he was not of that kind, and knowing he had a right to the highway, as the approaching line of leveled bayonets came forward he stopped his buggy and reaching for his pistol cocked it and shouted, "I'll shoot the first man who sticks a bayonet in my horse." He was alone and there were more than 100 negroes with Springfield rifles and gleaming bayonets and several hundred others looking on. He knew and the negroes knew that they could butcher him with great ease, but they felt certain he would kill one or more of them before it could be done. The captain shouted "halt" and opened the ranks so that Butler could pass and in a little while dismissed his company and went to Gen. Prince Rivers and swore out a warrant charging young Butler with interfering with his company at drill. Butler went on home and told his father what had happened, and Mr. Robert Butler, whose plantation lay above Hamburg and who had a great deal of trouble with negro thieves and was in every way a very pugnacious

man, hurried to the trial justice and swore out a warrant for Adams obstructing the highway.

The trial was set for the succeeding Saturday, July 8. The incident was noised about all over the counties of Edgefield and Aiken in a very little while. It had been the settled purpose of the leading white men of Edgefield to seize the first opportunity that the negroes might offer them to provoke a riot and teach the negroes a lesson as it was generally believed that nothing but bloodshed and a good deal of it could so well answer the purpose of redeeming the state from negro and carpet bag rule. Mr. Robert Butler sent to Edgefield for Gen. M. C. Butler to defend his son and prosecute Adams at the trial. Col. A. P. Butler, the captain of the Sweetwater Sabre Club, summoned our company to meet at Summer Hill, three miles from Hamburg at twelve o'clock. It was our purpose to attend the trial to see that young Butler had protection and, if any opportunity offered, to set the ball rolling, and if one did not offer, we were to make one. We did not go in uniform and were expressly ordered to leave our rifles and carbines so that when assembled we were only armed with pistols. Various schemes were presented and discussed but nothing definite was arranged except that we would go to Hamburg in a body at 4 o'clock the time for the trial, and see what would turn up. The fact, however, that we had assembled was made known to Prince Rivers and when the company reached Hamburg we were informed that the trial had been postponed and it appeared for a while that all of our trouble and pains as well as the schemes we had formulated would come to naught. Dock Adams had assembled his company in the armory of the Sibley building, a two story brick structure on the corner of Main and Rivers streets. General Rivers had disappeared from town.

There was much talking and planning among the leaders, the two Butlers and others of the leading citizens. At about 5 o'clock it was decided that the demand should be made of Dock Adams to surrender his guns and notice to that effect was sent him by Gen. M. C. Butler, with the further information that he had shown the guns were a menace to peace and good order and that the whites having lost all patience were resolved to put an end to his outrageous and insolent conduct. When the demand was made he promptly and peremptorily refused. He was then told that we would take them. When the sun was about half an hour high the little band of white men, numbering about seventy in all, of whom forty-five belonged to the Sweetwater Sabre Club, rode down Main street towards the armory and wheeling into a cross street we approached the river and halted in the street which was occupied by the trestle of the C. C. and A. railroad, now the Southern railway. The Sibley building was on the southwest corner of the square. We dismounted in the regular cavalry fashion and linked bridles. All of the disengaged men lined up. Then the order came, "All men having carbines or rifles step five paces to the front." Only five responded. It was now shown how great a mistake had been made in ordering the rifles left at home. The purpose of that order is easy to understand. We did not wish it to appear that we had come to Hamburg with malice aforethought, but merely as spectators at the Butler trial. Events had shaped themselves so that the purpose of compelling the surrender of the arms by the negroes once formed there was no time to make new preparations. Sixty white men (the others were detailed to take care of the horses) were about to attack 100 negroes who were armed with the most approved army rifles, had plenty of ammunition, and were fortified so to speak in a brick fort, while the whites had shot guns and pistols. But the difference in the blood and the color of the skin far more than made up the odds in the armament. The five men to whom the duty was assigned of opening the attack were Henry Getsen, Danlap Phinney, McKie Meriwether, Thomas Settles and Demetrius Mylos.

I will always remember with sadness an incident which took place just at this time. Young McKie Meriwether belonged to the sabre club, but his father did not. The older man, Joseph Meriwether, it will be remembered was the manager at Shaw's Mill two years before, who had manipulated that box and changed the negro majority into a white majority. He had heard of the trial and had brought his Winchester rifle with him. When the elder Meriwether joined the squad which was to take position behind the abutment of the railroad bridge diagonally in front of the Sibley building and some seventy-five yards away, his son, a very handsome young man about 25 years of age, came running towards him and unbuckling the pistol belt as he ran he handed the two pistols to his father and said, "Here, papa, take these and let me have the rifle." The exchange was made and the elder man took his place in the ranks while the younger along with the other four stepped off at a lively pace towards the end of the bridge. They marched in full view of the negroes who could see them from the windows of the Sibley building. The rest of the men were deployed on the other two sides of the square, being on the north and east sides of the Sibley building which had no windows on those sides. In fact it had no windows at all except on the front towards the river. As I belonged to the first set of fours, I was detailed along with Pierce Butler and James McKie and one other whose name I forget, and placed in position at the northwest corner of the square directly in the rear of the Sibley building. The square, I will state, was a small one with sides probably seventy-five yards long. The entrance to the second story of the Sibley building where the negroes were in hiding was by a pair of steps running up on the outside from Main street to a landing in front of the door on the west side.

The sun was just setting when orders were given to the squad at the bridge abutment to begin firing on the building. The other whites were stationed up and down the sidewalks on the northern and eastern sides of the square, while the western side was left unguarded. As both sides were using breach-loading guns notwithstanding only five white men were doing any shooting the fusillade of shots was very rapid. The armory had five windows and the negroes were firing from these, but most of the shots must have been fired while they were squatted below the window sills and their guns were elevated, as there

was little or no sign of where the bullets went. The marks of the bullets on the sand stone window sills are still to be seen though filled up level with cement. The noise of the battle, if it may be termed one, was of course heard in Augusta and soon a considerable body of men gathered on the Georgia bank, but as some stray bullets from the negroes' rifles at the windows gave them notice that they were in danger, they very soon retired out of sight. However, it was not long after dark before men belonging to the military organizations in Augusta and others began to pour across the bridge with arms to take part in the fray. The square on which the Sibley building stood had had two or three other stores on the main street side. The old bank building was on the southeastern corner and there were several small wooden shanties on the other parts of the square. As soon as darkness fell the whites began to search all of these buildings and very shortly a negro man was discovered in hiding. He was dragged out while squalling at the top of his voice through fright. He was shot by some one who in the excitement and anger forgot himself and though not seriously wounded his screams and cries resounded so as to be heard for half a mile around. Just about this time we were all shocked and enraged by the news from the bridge abutment that McKie Meriwether, the brave young man whose exchange of arms with his father I have mentioned, had been killed. There has always been some mystery about his death. He along with the other four riflemen had been firing at the windows when his brain was pierced by a ball which entered at the top of his head. It was never known whether he was shot from above by some one who crossed the bridge or was struck by a ball from the armory which hit some piece of iron and glanced downward. If the white men were determined when they began that bloody business, this sad and unexpected death added ten-fold fury to their feelings. The men who were holding the horses had hitched them all by this time in a vacant lot and without orders from anyone and apparently without plan they joined in. As soon as it was entirely dark the negroes in the armory took advantage of the opportunity to make their escape down the steps of which I have spoken and to flee up the river. Some of them were too much frightened to make this attempt and sought concealment in the cellar and other hiding places in the stories. Some of them ripped up the floors and hid under them. The whites from Augusta brought over at Gen. Butler's request a small piece of iron (no regular balls were available) and fired off in front of the Sibley building. After two discharges there was no further firing from the negroes as all who could had fled and the town was deserted. The square which was entirely surrounded by this time was searched thoroughly. Every nook and corner of every building was examined by the whites who broke in the doors with axes. Prisoners to the number of some thirty or forty men were captured and as soon as taken were placed under guard on river street some 75 yards above the wagon bridge. About 8.30 o'clock after a period of intense darkness the moon rose and began to cast its lurid light over the strange and unaccustomed scene. The number of whites had increased immensely by this time and the searching parties worked northward from the Sibley building which had been the first one taken and thoroughly searched. Two negroes who had reasons to know that their lives would not be spared if captured tried to make their escape by jumping over the fence on the north side of the square and running down the street towards the trestle. The first to do this was Jim Cook, the town marshal who had in the years of negro rule clubbed a great number of white men and in every way illustrated his brutal and fiendish hate of the whites as well as the delight he took in degrading them. As he sprang over the fence the squad to which I belonged was the first to fire. We all fired once at him. He ran down the center of the street towards the railroad trestle towards the moon so that it was easy to see the whole performance. White men were standing or sitting on both sides of the street and as he ran between these they fired at him, the wonder being that as the street was narrow the bullets did not wound or kill the white men opposite. It seemed as though Cook was bound to escape as he had nearly reached the trestle and none of the pistol bullets appeared to have taken effect. Fear lent speed to his flight and the crack of the pistols, some forty or fifty of which must have been fired at him sounded like so many pop-guns. Suddenly the loud report of a shot gun rang out and Cook tumbled in a heap almost turning a somersault. Pierce Butler and I, hearing that it was Cook that had been killed, had the curiosity to leave our post and walk down to where he was lying and as the shadows made it somewhat doubtful Pierce struck a match and being very familiar with Cook's face remarked with satisfaction, "Yes, it's Cook." The negro was more hated by the whites of the surrounding country than any other individual of the race. A large part of his face had been torn away by the buckshot which had laid him low after all of the pistol balls had missed their mark.

A while afterwards when the searching parties had worked their way through the different buildings on the square another negro jumped over the fence at the same spot, but he had no time to run. Pierce Butler and I who had remained together the entire night were standing on the back steps of Lipfield's store waiting for him to bring us some water from the well. Two men from Augusta whose names I never learned, but who wore the uniform of the Clinch Rifles had just obtained water and were standing on the sidewalk. The negro leaped the fence at the rear of the store but fell dead almost instantly. The two riflemen had thrown their guns which gleamed in the moon light to their shoulders and fired with deadly effect. This was one of the negro militia men. The moon by this time was getting high in the heavens and it must have been nearly eleven o'clock. The searching was ended by breaking in the front door of Louis Schiller's store which was also his residence. Schiller was a low Jew who had joined the negroes and had been given office by them, having held the position of county auditor until the county of Aiken was set apart. We wanted to hang him as the resentment against white scalawags was intense. He had been born and raised in

Hamburg and had really sold himself to the negroes. We did not find him in the house, but learned afterwards that the poor wretch escaped us by climbing through a trap door which led out on the roof and that he was lying behind a parapet on top of the house while execrations against his name and the purpose to swing him were being expressed by the white men below. All of the work being practically finished the whites began to disperse and those from Augusta to retrace their steps across the bridge. Gen. Butler and Col. Butler had very quietly departed some time before without leaving any orders and the mob, if it may be called such, rapidly thinned out. About this time James Lanham, my neighbor, and James McKie who had been on the post with me a great part of the night, and both first cousins of young Meriwether who had been killed, came to where a group of us were standing. One of them asked the question as to whether it was not a dear piece of work for us to lose one of our best men and have only two negroes dead and another wounded. It was agreed that we could not have a story like that go out as a record of the night's work. Lanham said to me, "I have no balls in my pistol and no cartridges." I told him that I had only shot once at Cook and had five balls left. We exchanged pistols and heard McKie soon found others of their way of thinking. The party made their way to the place where the negro prisoners were held and Henry Getson, who lived two miles from Hamburg and who knew all of the negroes in the town and neighborhood, was asked to designate those of the meanest character and most worthy of death. As fast as he would select from among the prisoners those he thought ought to be killed—all militiamen—they were taken off a little ways down the street and shot. After five had been thus dealt with the little squad of white men who were still remaining in town seemed satisfied and it was decided that the rest of the negroes, some 25 or 30 in number, should be allowed to go. The permission was given and they were told to go up the street and you may depend on it that they were not slow to move. When they had got about 50 yards away the crowd fired a volley over their heads, but I could not see that it added anything to the speed which they were making. If young Meriwether had not lost his life I do not think any of these last negroes would have been killed, but the purpose of our visit to Hamburg was to strike terror and the next morning (Sunday) when the negroes who had fled to the swamp returned (some of them never did return, but kept on going) the ghastly sight which met their gaze of seven dead negroes lying stark and stiff certainly had its effect.

One of those doomed to die escaped in a rather curious way. Whether it was that the white men were sick of the bloody work or something else I do not know. Being the last of the doomed men, they either aimed badly or some of them did not fire at all at the word of command. When the shots rang out this negro fell as though dead and as soon as the whites went away he crawled into the high weeds which were near the road and thus escaped with only a wound in his thigh. He was afterwards the star witness against us and the means of getting the names of some of the men who were there. His name was Pomp Curry and by a strange coincidence he was the boy who, when I went to school at Liberty Hill in 1860 and 1861 and boarded with Mr. Kiah Edwards, made our fires, brought wood, blacked shoes, etc. He disappeared, whether by death or fright, I do not know. After the election of 1876 I never heard of him again.

It was now after midnight and the moon high in the heavens looked down peacefully on the deserted town and dead negroes, whose lives had been offered up as a sacrifice to the fanatical teachings and fiendish hate of those who sought to substitute the rule of the African for that of the Caucasian in South Carolina.

The party with which I left Hamburg was the last to leave the place. Young Meriwether's neighbors crossed the bridge and returned home on the Georgia side. We got our horses and when we approached the outskirts of the town we stopped at the famous Spout Spring, whose waters gushed from the bluffs back of the town. In the better days of the town this spring had been provided with granite coping and a cover and was always a place for travelers to slake their thirst as they came in or to guard against it as they were leaving, the roads leading through a dry and sandy region. The names of the men in the party, as I remember were: Henry Getson, chief of our drum head court martial, Milledge Horne, who lived two miles below me, James Lanham, Gus Glover, Joe Mays, Sam Mays, Henry Simpson, John Swearingen, Dunlap Phinney, William Cook, and myself. Many of these are dead. When we had drunk and washed John Swearingen stepped up on the bank behind the spring and seizing the post upon which was nailed a notice, "Five dollar fine for dipping any unclean vessel in this spring," broke it off at the ground and threw it into the middle of the road saying with an oath that Jim Cook would never arrest another white man for drinking at that spring.

This was an allusion to an incident of the preceding year when Rev. Mahlon Padgett, who was carrying cotton to Augusta, having no cup had stooped at the spring and drank and had been arrested by Cook and hurried before the town council charged with having broken the ordinance of the town because having drunk from the spring he had dipped an unclean vessel in it. He was found guilty and fined five dollars.

This had been a momentous and strenuous day's work. We were all tired but more than satisfied with the result. When we reached Henry Getsen's house he asked us to stop and eat some water melons which we very gladly did and as all of the others except Horne lived further up the road than myself we kept company as we wended our way homeward. The first streaks of dawn were reddening the east when I reached my mother's where I had left my wife. My mother was taken ill a short time afterwards and died the latter part of August. Most of the men who had organized and carried out this program lived in Edgefield county, but a few were citizens of Aiken living along the Edgefield line.

To be continued.