

Service and Sacrifice: The Kidnapping of the *General*

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Part II (Continued from the August 2015 *Historicalog*)

Andrews' timetable required the Ohioans to meet in Chattanooga Thursday afternoon April 10, then travel south to Marietta, Georgia that evening. On Friday morning they would receive the remainder of their directions and take a train northward. The plan was to meet Mitchel's army on their arrival. Andrews instructed the men that starting out in Marietta, they would form one cohesive group "and either come through in a body or die together." Henceforth these men would go down in history as the "Andrews Raiders." They trusted Andrews as their leader, but wondered whether he had taken on more than he was capable of. As a man, he did inspire confidence, for he possessed a commanding presence, standing six feet tall and weighing some 180 pounds. His features were strong, with a direct, penetrating eye, while his voice carried a "firmness of tone" which contributed to his air of authority. Andrews projected the appearance of southern gentility: "His striking personal qualities added very much to his powers," Pittenger wrote. Adhering to the timetable was of vital importance. Burning the bridges would allow Mitchel to take Chattanooga Friday April 11. But he must not precede the raiders into Huntsville, for that would put much Confederate traffic on the rails, making it extremely difficult for the raiders to get through to him.

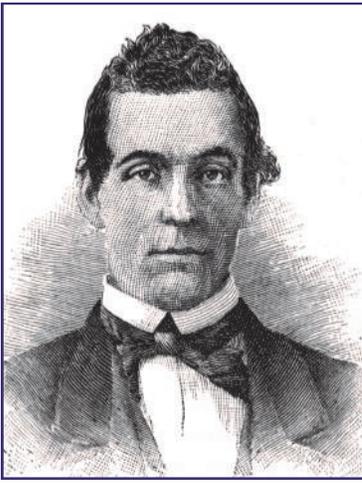
Andrews' planning and timing seemed foolproof, so carefully thought out—what could go wrong? The men had three days to travel the 200 miles to Marietta from Shelbyville, arriving Thursday night. Very early Friday morning April 11 the raiders were to seize the locomotive the *General* at Big Shanty (today called Kennesaw) and drive it up the Western & Atlantic line past six stations through Tunnel Hill and past Ringgold to their destination, Chattanooga, which General U.S. Grant would later describe as "one of the wildest places you ever saw." On the way they would burn the bridges they had crossed over and cut telegraph wires, all of which would take about seven hours. In the meantime, Mitchel's march on Huntsville would deliver that city to him, and the raiders would meet him there. The men agreed: "This was glorious. The thought of such a coming into camp after piercing the heart of the Confederacy set every nerve on fire!" wrote Pittenger. Explanations completed, the meeting ended as a torrential downpour created unforeseen hazards and obstacles just as the men set out for Chattanooga. On foot, traveling in small groups separated from their fellows, the men slogged through deep, shoe-sucking mud bent on finding dry lodgings for the night. The heavy rain would continue for days. They could not know that, because of the rains and difficult travel, Andrews on Wednesday postponed the seizing of the train

from Friday until Saturday, April 12. In the meantime, General Mitchel captured Huntsville on the 11th as he had planned.

Among the three companions who struggled along with William Pittenger, 2nd OVI, were Perry G. Shadrach, 2nd OVI, Co. K, about 21, who enlisted in Knoxville, Ohio; and William Campbell from Salineville, Ohio, civilian, age 22. George Davenport Wilson, 32, 2nd OVI, Co. B, was the third, and to quote Pittenger on this prominent figure in the mission, Wilson was "the most remarkable man of all who enlisted with Andrews." Pittenger described Wilson as "not highly educated...had spent many years as an itinerant journeyman shoemaker. He had traveled and observed much and forgotten nothing. In vigor and force of language I never knew a man who surpassed him. He delighted in argument on any topic—social, political, or religious—and was an adversary not to be [underestimated]....In the use of scathing and bitter language, in...unyielding dogmatism, in the power to bury an opponent under a flood of exhaustless abuse, he excelled. In coolness and bravery, in natural shrewdness and quickness of intellect, he was fully equal to Andrews; no danger could frighten him. His resources always rose with the demand, and on one memorable occasion he was carried to the very summit of moral heroism, and in the whole war no death was more sublime than his. Our friendship, which began on this first night, increased to the end, though we often engaged in heated discussion." As they made their way south Wilson warned his companions against overdoing their role-playing: "being better rebels than the rebels themselves," Pittenger recalled.

He described his friend: "Wilson was tall and spare, with high cheek-bones, overhanging brows, sharp gray eyes, thin brownish hair and long thin whiskers. The accompanying photo was taken ten years earlier." He declares that "Wilson excelled all the other members of the party in intellectual strength and acuteness...." George Wilson impressed Pittenger immediately as a natural leader.

George Davenport Wilson had been born in Belmont County, Ohio in 1830 to George and Elizabeth Clark Wilson. He married Martha Marple [Maple?] in 1849. They had two children: a son, David Davenport Wilson, born in 1852, and a daughter whose name and exact year of birth are unknown, and who died young in 1861 after her father's enlistment, according to available records. The senior Wilson, George's father, also died in 1861. In that same year of family tragedy, Martha and George Davenport Wilson were divorced on February 8. A November 1866 record from the Adjutant General's Office indicates that George enlisted in the Union army to serve



George D. Wilson

for three years at Franklin, Ohio on August 31, 1861. Following divorce and death in the family, it is possible that George looked upon his enlistment as a way to assuage the intense heart pain he must have felt during those difficult months. His most precious possessions, always carried with him, were a gold ring that had been a gift from Martha, and a pin which contained an ambrotype of her. He was mustered into Company B, 2nd OVI with the

rank of private and ordered to report for training at Camp Dennison, north of Milford, Ohio. The 2nd OVI was composed mainly of southern Ohio men. Company B was from Warren County and was under the command of General Ormsby Mitchel, according to historian Dallas Bogan.

Plodding through mud, braving swollen creeks, cold and wet to the skin in the unceasing rain, the small groups moved deeper into southern territory. Andrews had given the men money, which was usually refused by the simple folk from whom they sought food and lodging, for the raiders' Kentucky story was believed; their hosts thought themselves privileged "to do something for the gallant Kentuckians on their way to fight for the liberty of the South." Progress was slow, and by Thursday evening Wilson's group learned that Andrews had postponed the mission by a day, owing to the difficulty of travel in the constant rain. Andrews did not think Mitchel would carry out his march on Huntsville as planned, also due to the bad weather. This was a decided risk on Andrews' part, and an error in his judgment of Mitchel's determined character. Buell would have let the weather slow him down, but not Mitchel, who was ten miles north of Huntsville at the end of the third day. By 6 AM Friday, April 11, Huntsville was in Union hands the raiders learned, "no shots fired."

As for Andrews' men, by Friday morning they had crossed the Tennessee River, the last remaining obstacle to their boarding a train together in Chattanooga at 5 PM for the 118 mile ride south to Marietta, Georgia, just north of Atlanta. In those days the average speed of the engines was 16-17 miles per hour over the hilly terrain and around tight curves; the trip would take seven hours, arrival time was around midnight. Marietta was the starting point of their mission Saturday morning. The men noted that, even though the South was at war, passports were not required. That would change after the mission the Ohioans were about to undertake.

It was very early morning, the 12th of April. One year ago on this day Fort Sumter was bombarded and the war had begun. After scarcely four hours' sleep at the hotel the raiders awoke, dressed hurriedly, made sure to check their revolvers, and immediately reported to Andrews' room for a final briefing. Their number had unexpectedly decreased by two

who overslept and missed the train they were to take to Big Shanty, the breakfast stop. At Marietta the hotel where the group spent the night coincidentally was used as headquarters by an Ohio general of notorious fame, W.T. Sherman, who was leading his great army to Atlanta two years later, in 1864.

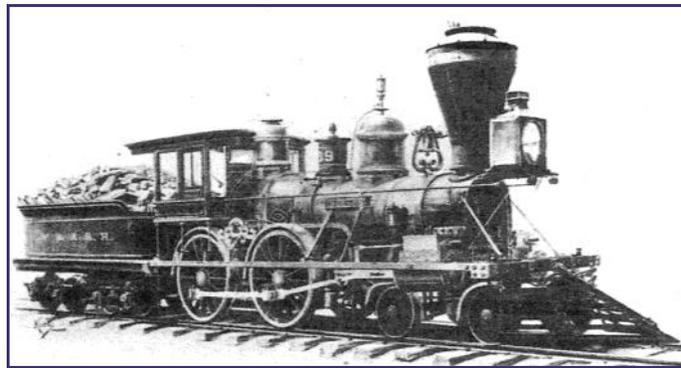
The secret operation was now underway and there was no turning back. Instructions were to seat themselves near to each other in the same car from Marietta to Big Shanty, where the train, pulled by the locomotive the *General*, would make a twenty minute stop for passengers and crew to eat breakfast at the trackside hotel. At that time the men were not to leave their train until Andrews gave the signal, and they were to look to him in the event of an unforeseen occurrence. Andrews and the engineers would man the locomotive and the raiders were to climb quickly into the third car behind the tender, which would remain with the engine; the rest would be uncoupled. Split-second timing was crucial; the slightest delay could mean disaster and death. Andrews had not told the men that the theft of this locomotive, the *General*, would be perpetrated near a large Confederate army encampment. The ranking Ohioan, a sergeant-major, now spoke, warning the others that Mitchel's taking of Huntsville surely had resulted in Confederate authorities on high alert, massive southward movement of Confederate rail traffic and mobilization of Southern troops. He felt certain the mission would fail and the lives of the entire group were at risk. Andrews would not waver; he vowed, "I will succeed or leave my bones in Dixie." He had even created a story about an "emergency ammunition train" rushing to Corinth, Mississippi to support Confederate General Beauregard, on the general's orders. This was to be their cover if the train they hijacked was stopped. No one would question Beauregard's orders, Andrews felt certain. Andrews' air of authority lent credence to his persuasive talk: he said the changed circumstances worked in their favor; with all the confusion, panic, and commotion on the line resulting from Huntsville falling to Mitchel, their stolen engine would be less likely to be spotted, if not completely overlooked. The very boldness of the deed assured its success, he added, because no one suspected it could be done. Yet in George Wilson's group the seeds of doubt had been planted by the sergeant-major. How could a fight with Confederates be avoided? They fervently hoped the twenty minutes allowed for breakfast in Big Shanty would be time enough to accomplish the deed. Fortunately Big Shanty had no telegraph. And still unknown to the raiders, the enemy soldiers in the Confederate camp would be sleeping. Reveille had not yet sounded.

Arriving at Big Shanty, the Ohioans were overcome with enthusiasm. The locomotive, tender, and boxcars now idled, ripe for the picking. The name "General" was lettered in gold on a plaque affixed to the engine's side. The engine was painted dark green with red-orange trim; the long boiler, a metallic silver, and the valves and domes on top were shiny brass. The number "39" was stenciled on the sand-box atop the boiler. A cowcatcher stuck out in front right under a large boxy oil lantern, and a huge funnel-shaped stack puffed steam and smoke. There were four five-foot diameter drivers behind

and four smaller wheels under the front of the boiler. The *General* was indeed an impressive engine of great power, to Andrews' raiders easily capable of outrunning any pursuers following in the wake of burning bridges, cut wires, and damaged track.

While everyone on the train was occupied with breakfast inside the Big Shanty station, now for only a few moments the train was unguarded. In seconds Andrews, two engineers, and the fireman had the engine, tender, and three boxcars uncoupled from the rest of the train and quickly boarded the *General*. The raiders sprang into the third boxcar. Not counting Andrews there were now nineteen Ohio soldiers: one man had missed a wakeup call earlier in the week, he did not take part in the raid; two others were captured en route and were forced to join the Confederate army, in accordance with the survival plan; two men failed to report at Marietta, presumably having overslept.

As luck would have it a Confederate guard was posted at the edge of the camp scarcely a dozen feet from the locomotive, and uncomprehending, saw the whole proceeding, but before he or anyone else could react, the *General* sped away. Someone at breakfast happened to look out the window a minute later and shouted an alarm. Great uproar and confusion immediately arose; no one knew what to do. However, the conductor, whose duties in those days included responsibility for the engine, beyond merely collecting tickets, began to run after the *General*, as he was at a total loss to think of any other action to take. The first part of Andrews' plan, the actual kidnapping, was a success. Now would begin the destruction of telegraph communication, the tearing up of iron rails, and the burning of bridges along the 138 miles to Chattanooga. But, had Andrews stuck to the original schedule of Friday instead of letting the bad weather put the mission off a day, the men would have had an easier time



The locomotive General c1862. Illustration by Wilbur G. Kurtz (Colonel James G. Bogle Collection).

of it. Now, on Saturday April 12, with Mitchel in Huntsville, the railroad was in disorder, "every train far behind time and two 'extras' were approaching, making each mile more hazardous for the raiders, as they were operating according to Friday's timetable." From time to time they stopped to cut wires, pry up lengths of iron rail and heave ties into the boxcars to be used in bridgeburning. At this initial stage of their mission the men experienced "wonderful exhilaration" as though success were a sure thing. Bonds writes, "George Wilson, the oldest and perhaps wisest of the party, put a stop to this. He too was pleased with the clean getaway thus far, but saw no reason to get carried away. 'Don't be so fast now,' he chided, ... 'we are not out of the woods yet.'" The words were hardly out of his mouth when the engine began to lose steam and the train came to a halt. Spirits plummeted, worry and fear seized the raiders. Their luck held, however; merely closing a damper allowed the pirated *General* to get rolling again.

Thirty miles up the track unforeseen difficulties began. They had to wait for a local freight and pulled onto a side track. The freight carried a red flag, the signal that another train was following. Andrews protested having to wait, forcefully telling his "ammunition for Beauregard" story. When the second train arrived, it too carried a red flag, further delaying the *General*. There were now three trains impeding their flight, over an hour waiting time, a critical and vulnerable position for the raiders. George Wilson and his fifteen fellows in the boxcar were forced to be completely silent: "So

intolerable was our suspense that the order for a deadly conflict would have been felt as a relief." Finally they were able to be on their way again, but the hour's forced delay ultimately proved to be crucial...

TO BE CONTINUED in the February 2016
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