



## A Texas Cavalryman at Honey Springs

By Hank Fitzgerald

*Honey Springs Depot, Indian Territory, July 16, 1863*

Jackson Andrews shivered under a large oak tree. Rain drizzled down, murmuring softly as it hit the leaves of the trees. Jackson and the other men of the 29<sup>th</sup> Texas Cavalry formed the center of the Confederate line. They had arrived at Honey Springs Depot about a week before in preparation for an attack on Fort Gibson to the north of the Arkansas River.

Jackson attempted to keep his powder dry; if he didn't he would have serious problems. Jackson had joined the 29<sup>th</sup> in 1861 at the age of fifteen. His father, at age fifty-five, had sent his two sons off to fight in his place. Jackson sank deep into the memories of the day he left. Visions of fame, honor, and glory had clouded his young mind.

All of these visions left him after the first skirmish he and his brother participated in, near Fort Smith, Arkansas. It was a small battle, but it stuck in Jackson's mind, as it would forever. His brother, Jim, had been killed in the first volley. They were dismounted from their horses, readying their shortened, fifty-two caliber Enfield muskets, then the volley tore into them.

It sounded like an enormous clap of thunder during a spring storm - that one thunderclap that makes children run to their mothers' protective arms and causes the strongest of men to jump. Smoke billowed forward, clouding the field.

Jackson had heard the sickening thud of the minié ball connecting with Jim. Jim groaned and fell, first to his knees, then flat on his face. He was gone when Jackson turned him over. After Jim's death, Jackson felt lost, like a lone leaf blown to and fro in the wind. He wandered aimlessly about the 29<sup>th</sup>. Through several small skirmishes, and the attack on Fort Gibson, he fought half-heartedly, only to stay alive.

Then he found Bryce. Bryce's father was a drunk and his mother was dead. Joining the Confederate army got him out of the awful orphanage he lived in. He was a stocky, strong man with dark eyes and light brown hair.

Bryce sank down beside Jackson. "Jack, the pickets got hit."



“I saw.” Jackson answered. The sky darkened even more as the sun sank. The drizzle slackened as well.

“You think it’d be worth a walk back to the depot for supper?” Jackson asked.

“Nope, they’ll give us them maggoty hard tack crackers, same as we’ll get here.”

Jackson stood and repositioned the gray felt, wide-brimmed cavalry hat that hung low on his head. “I’ve got a mighty hunger for some beans, and by the eternal, I’m gonna get me some!” he said.

“Good luck!” Bryce said, smiling.

Jackson strode down the quagmire of the Texas Road, his cavalry boots sinking ankle deep into the soaked clay. The scabbard that held his saber knocked against his leg as he walked. He was one of the few in the 29<sup>th</sup> still carrying a saber. Most discarded theirs, thinking them to be useless.

Jackson smelled the smoke of small fires, mixed with the sweet smell that the air always holds after the rain. He crossed the low, wooded bridge spanning Elk Creek. Farther up the road he passed the bridge keeper’s home. The Elk Creek Bridge was a toll bridge, preying on weary travelers in wagons who would rather just pay the toll than look for a ford.

Jackson then passed into Honey Springs Depot. The small town was bustling with activity. Townspeople were tending their various jobs and the soldiers theirs. Jackson slowed his pace to take a long look at a teenage girl feeding some chickens. She had long black hair, brown eyes and a slender figure. Her complexion was darker than his as she was most likely Cherokee.

Jackson blinked his eyes as he realized he was staring. “Do you need something, soldier?” she asked, looking up. Jackson, thinking frantically, tried to salvage the situation.

“Umm, yes. I wanted to know if you might sell me a chicken or grain or flour.” Jackson stammered.

“You hungry?”

“Yes, I’ll eat most anything before that hard tack,” Jackson answered.

“I don’t believe I can sell you a chicken because we host your officers for dinner tonight, but I can give you some milk and cream,” she offered.

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll take whatever I can get,” Jackson said eagerly.

“Fine then, come with me. Your name?” she said.

“Jackson Andrews, Corporal.”



“I’m Mary Ashburne, pleased to meet you.”

She led him to the ice house behind the barn and opened the door.

“Here you are, keep your money and consider it a gift,” she said, handing him a jar of fresh milk and a jar of cool fresh cream.

“Much obliged,” Jackson thanked her. As he hopped the rail fence in front of the house, he saw General Cooper approaching on his black horse.

Cooper had a well-trimmed gray beard and a weathered face. A young lieutenant following the General on his own horse swooped in on Jackson.

“I demand to know what you were doing, Corporal!” he said indignantly.

“Ms. Ashburne offered me some milk and cream. I was simply foraging along, and it was offered to me.”

“General, Lieutenant, please come in. Mother has food ready for you,” Mary stepping in, flashing a quick smile to Jackson, who hastily made his getaway.

He returned to Bryce, who was attempting to bite into his hard tack. Jackson tossed him the jar of cream. Without a word he opened it and dipped his index finger, tasting it.

“Cream?” Bryce asked.

“Yep, and milk,” Jackson announced smugly.

“Where did you go?” Bryce asked, incredulously.

“Back to Texas,” Jackson said, laughing.

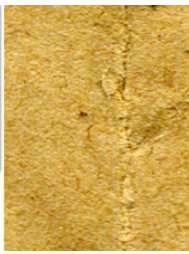
### *July 17, 1863 Honey Springs Depot*

“Look out there. Oh boy, we’re in for a big’un!” Jackson stared out across the field at the mass of blue forming at the other end.

“Gawd almighty, look at ‘em all,” another soldier marveled.

“Ah, we’ll be fine, half of ‘em are Negro and the other half Injun,” the Sergeant Major reassured his men.

The Union troops had marched hard all night to reach Honey Springs. They wanted to prevent the Confederates from massing for an attack on Fort Gibson.



Jackson and Bryce took their places on the line just inside the trees. Jackson pulled the hammer back on his musket to half cock and placed a percussion cap on the gun's nipple. The hammer would strike this cap and set off the spark that would light the powder. Soon, a blue line began to form in the middle of the field.

"We're gonna lick 'em here, we're gonna lick 'em and chase 'em straight back to Fort Gibson," Bryce said, grinning maniacally.

There is a strange peacefulness just before a battle begins. All of nature sings, as if to get one more song in before the carnage begins. The birds sang their brightest song; a light wind caressed the trees, causing the leaves to rustle in a symphony.

The peace was shattered like a window in a storm. The rebel cannons boomed, their shells whined across the field to spout up fountains of brown earth in front of the Federals. The Union artillery returned fire in a chorus of thunderous explosions.

The Federals had twelve cannons, the Confederates four. Their volleys were deeper and longer than those of the Rebels. Soon the staccato pops of muskets could be heard along with the cannonade.

"Company! Ready!" the Sergeant Major ordered.

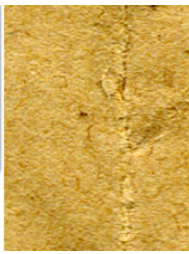
Jackson raised his rifle to his shoulder and pulled the hammer back to full cock. His heart pounded and his palms became clammy. Jackson always got an edge at the beginning of battle.

"Take your aim!"

Jackson brought his rifle sights to rest on the Blue line. He aimed at no one in particular; his Enfield was not pin-point accurate beyond more than a hundred yards. "Fire!"

The tree line erupted in orange flash and white smoke from the Confederate rifles. The smoke, which wouldn't fully disintegrate, formed a blinding cloud in front of the Rebel's eyes.

Jackson slammed the rifle butt into the ground and held the barrel with his left hand as his right groped for a cartridge from his box. The cartridges were small paper packets containing a minié ball seated atop the correct amount of powder. Jackson tore open the powder end with his teeth and poured in the powder. Then he pushed the bullet into the barrel with his thumb, along with the paper for wadding. He removed the ramrod from its position under the barrel to seat the bullet against the powder. He placed a fresh percussion cap onto the nipple and cocked the hammer.



“Ready!” the Sergeant Major repeated his commands as the cavalrymen fired another volley.

The Federals took everything they threw and pitched it right back at them. The Sergeant Major gave the order to “Fire at will,” meaning each man should fire as fast as he could reload. The man to Jackson’s left suddenly groaned as though punched in a bar fight. He dropped the rifle and clutched his gut, falling to his knees.

Men dropped here and there all along the line as the Federals threw volley after volley into the trees. Jackson watched as a line of blue began to maneuver out of its spot and advance on the center of the Rebel line. They positioned themselves to fire a volley at the Texans in the trees. The sun shone down on the silver barrels of the Federal’s Springfield rifles as they were raised to fire. Jackson took aim at a Federal officer brandishing a flashing saber and urging his men on. He suddenly thought, “This man is going to die.” It struck him as absurd that he should think this.

He wished to stop the battle and walk out to tell this man what he was about to do. He wanted to give him a chance to say goodbye to his friends and family. The strangest thoughts passed through Jackson’s mind during battle. He could never tell the other men of these thoughts; they would call him crazy or soft.

Jackson pulled the trigger to end the man’s life but was met with a dejected “click.”

He pulled the hammer back and replaced the percussion cap, thinking the malfunction was nothing more than a bad cap. He pressed the trigger and again, nothing happened.

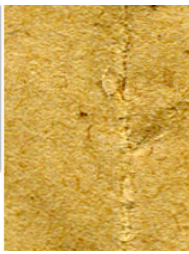
“Ah! My powder’s wet!” Jackson screamed. He turned and retrieved the gut-shot soldier’s musket, who had since died.

The blue line erupted in the smoke and flame of another volley. More men fell as the sounds of twigs and branches snapped from trees mingled with the groans and screams of anguish from the wounded. As the Federals reloaded, the yells of their officers floated across the field to the trees.

“Fall back! Retreat!”

As the shadowy figures of the Federals fell back, Col. Bass yelled to Jackson and the other Texans, “Charge, boys! We’ve got ‘em now!”

Jackson let out a bloodcurdling Rebel yell as the line advanced quickly from the trees. The smoky haze blinded and choked Jackson as he briskly maneuvered through it.



Jackson began stepping over dead men in the blue haze, strewn about like the scraps of a great banquet, the banquet of war. Bryce tripped over a body and grabbed Jackson's shoulder to steady himself. The moans of the Federal wounded in the field were like a melancholy orchestra. Jackson stepped on something and was startled by a sharp cry of pain. He found he had stepped on the hand of a wounded Yankee.

He set his eyes forward. Through the haze he saw shadowy figures moving about. In a sudden flash of orange flame and an eruption of white, choking smoke, a volley tore into the ranks. His men hastily threw off their rifles and fired back a disorganized, sputtering volley.

Just 30 paces away, the Yankees were reloading to fire again. As Jackson seated his shot with the ramrod of the Enfield, he chanced a glance over at Bryce. But Bryce wasn't there. Frantically, Jackson searched the ground for him, yet he was praying he would not find him there.

Bryce lay a few feet behind him, shot through the knee.

"Bryce! Come on, I'll help you to the trees," Jackson said.

"No, no, you've got to fight, don't mind me, I hear the Yanks treat our wounded pretty nice," Bryce said with a weak smile.

"No, sir! Get up now!" Jackson pulled Bryce up and handed him his Enfield for support, ramrod still stuck down the barrel. Bryce threw one arm over Jackson's shoulder and with the other arm used the rifle as a cane. Jackson and Bryce dragged themselves back to the trees after being overtaken by their retreating comrades.

Col. Bass ordered a retreat of all the Texas units back to Elk Creek. Bryce moaned from the pain in his leg as Jackson practically drug him down the Texas Road. The bridge soon came into view as Jackson and Bryce topped a small rise. The unit was ordered to make a defense of the bridge so that the wagons and artillery pieces could be driven across.

The Confederates formed a staggered firing line across the bridge in the trees.

"Lean me against that tree there." Bryce's voice was tired and airy. Jackson did as he was asked and tied his bandana around the wound in Bryce's knee.

"Get on the line, I'll be alright here. I've got my pistol and my knife." Bryce slid his Remington revolver from its holster and laid it in his lap. He removed the knife and plunged it into the earth next to himself.



Jackson kneeled at the edge of the wooden bridge. The yells of Federal officers, mingled with the cheers of the charging soldiers, formed a song to strike fear into the hearts of the beaten and bloody Rebels. The Indians were the first to attempt to take the bridge. Jackson fired as fast as he could reload. Elk Creek was stained a red watercolor with the blood of both sides, and the bridge was littered with Union and Confederate bodies alike.

Soon the fighting was a savage hand-to-hand. Men stabbed, hit, scratched, and bit each other in attempts to survive the battle. Jackson's saber was coated with the blood of his enemies. Blood streamed from a gash in his arm. The grunts of men struggling in a fight to the death sounded like the exertions of a great war beast chasing after its prey. The Union blacks and Indians fought savagely to take the bridge. Jackson was locked in a brutal struggle with a black man from Kansas. Jackson was delivered a thunderous blow to the head and fell to the ground dazed. The black man raised his Springfield to smash Jackson's skull, but a dark blotch appeared in the center of his blue woolen shirt. He stared surprised at his ailment as though this was something strange that he never knew existed.

Jackson turned to see Bryce holding his pistol shakily in his outstretched arm. Men started to run. Jackson pulled Bryce up from the ground, and they repeated their ritual of dragging themselves toward the rear, joined like Siamese twins, both bleeding and defeated.

Suddenly before them was Col. Charles Demorse, atop his horse, Selim. Without a word he stopped an artillery wagon making its way to the rear and told Bryce and Jackson to get on.

"You deserve a ride, boys, get on now." With that, he rode off to rally his men to a futile defense.

The situation was frantic at the depot. The cavalymen of Scanland and Gillette's squadrons hastily began burning and destroying anything that could not be taken with them. The low, white hospital tents sat like sinister mushrooms at the edge of the camp.

"Alright, Jack, get yourself outta here. I can get to the tent," Bryce said.

"I'm not leaving you, come on!" Jackson said roughly.

"No, Jack, no! They're not takin' my leg, they're not takin' it!"

Bryce screamed, begged, pleaded and beseeched all the way to the tent, past the moaning wounded, right onto the surgeons' blood-stained table.

"Hold him, hold him down, son!" The surgeon had an orderly lay across Bryce's legs; Jackson held his arms.

A young nurse, no older than fifteen, stroked his face and soothed him. The surgeon removed his saw.



“This’ll be quick. There’s almost no bone to cut through,” he said casually. He began cutting. Bryce screamed out a shriek to smash windows, tears not only rolled down his face but also Jackson’s.

“Bryce, I’m so sorry. I’m – I, I just...” Jackson sobbed unashamedly.

“Jackson Andrews, you low down scalawag son of a AAAAAAUGH!” Bryce’s hateful words were cut off by a scream, and then he passed out. The procedure went smoothly after that.

Jackson was led away sobbing, the young nurse soothing him.

*July 21, 1863 Fort Smith, Arkansas*

“The trip here did him no good, but I managed to find him a bed.” The Fort Surgeon led Jackson to the Artillery ammunition box serving as Bryce’s bed. Chaplain Alex Campbell was kneeling next to him, reading from Revelation in the Bible.

“The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done.”

Jackson sat down on the box of a bed, where Bryce’s right leg would have been.

“Jackson, you...” Bryce broke into a fit of coughing.

“Gangrene, it’s ailing him badly. I don’t think he’s got long,” the surgeon said grimly.

“Jackson, you’re on my leg,” Bryce said.

“No, I’m not, Bryce.”

“Shh, just do as he says. He can’t cope with the fact that he has one leg,” Chaplain Campbell said.

“Did...Did we whip ‘em?” Bryce sounded like a sick child.

“Yea Bryce, you whipped ‘em, you whipped ‘em good,” Jackson answered. Bryce coughed and convulsed on the bed.

“I think it’s time for you to go, Sergeant Andrews,” the surgeon said warmly.

“Goodbye, Bryce. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“No, you won’t. You won’t,” Bryce croaked.

That night, Sergeant Bryce D. Curtis died of a gangrenous leg. He was buried in Fort Smith cemetery.



*August 1, 1866 Honey Springs, Indian Territory*

Lt. Jackson Andrews dismounted his horse. Throughout the war, he had risen from Private to Lieutenant in the Rebel cavalry. The end of the war had found him in Arkansas. Rather than give up his uniform, saber, rifle, and most importantly, his pride, he struck out for Indian Territory. He would fight no more, but he would never surrender.

The Ashburne house was a shadow of its former glory. The Ashburnes had left when the depot was overrun and not returned until 1865. Jackson strode up the creaky steps to the porch and grasped the tarnished silver knocker. The white paint of the door was cracked and flaking, and some chips of paint fluttered to the ground when he knocked.

The door opened to expose Anne Ashburne. “What do you want, haven’t you heard the war is over?” she exclaimed harshly.

Undaunted, Jackson said, “My name is Lieutenant Jackson Andrews; I have come to call on Mary.”

“Can’t you just leave us well enough alone?”

“Mother!” Mary appeared beside her. Jackson nervously turned his hat over and over in his hands.

“I’m sorry, sir, do I know you?” she inquired.

“No, at least, not yet. We only had one, short and somewhat trivial meeting.” Jackson took a deep breath. “You have undoubtedly forgotten me, but have never forgotten you.” Mary stepped onto the porch, closing the door. Her mother sighed, exasperated.

“What do you propose we do, Mr...”

“Andrews. Jackson Andrews. I am open to suggestions on how to spend this time.”

“Mr. Andrews, I would be delighted if you’d take me on a walk, so that I can get to know you,” Mary said smiling.

“Very well,” Jackson said, offering his arm. She took it, and they began their first of many walks.



*July 17, 1933 Checotah, Oklahoma*

“That’s the story.” Jackson Andrews’ old cavalry hat is nicked and damaged. The felt is moth eaten and the gold braided hat band is frayed and frizzled. He locks hands with his wife, Mary, and they smile at each other. “I’m glad someone finally got that outta this old head before I died or forgot it all.” He and his wife are almost a hundred years old, but it is apparent his wife will outlive him.

Louis Gaines, a journalist with the Works Progress Administration, is tasked with finding Civil War veterans and retrieving their stories before they die.

“I never surrendered, you know,” Jackson says. “Our house is the final piece of the Confederacy in existence.” His wife rolls her eyes. “If I wanted to pick up my saber and fight again, I could. Technically, I’m a fugitive of the law,” Jackson smiles smugly and looks straight into Gaines’ eyes. “That was the worst experience of my life, but I’d do it a million times again.”

Jackson motions to the cavalry saber hung on the wall behind Gaines. “Why don’t you take that, a little proof that this ole’ Johnny Reb is still around,” Jackson smiles again at his wife. “Sometimes, I think maybe my own son doesn’t know that.” The creaky screen door opens and slams in the kitchen.

“Ma? Pa? You home?”

“Speaking of my son, there he is.” Bryce Curtis Andrews enters the room, grinning...