

Autobiography: Abner A. Alford, 1854-1927

Transcribed and submitted by Don Alford, AAFA #59

PREFACE

The document which follows is an unfinished manuscript which was written in 1906 by Abner A. Alford, M.D. Dr. Alford was born in Pike County, Arkansas, the son of Madison Ewing Alford and Nancy Orrick Alford. They had 13 children:

William Alford, born 1835

John Alford, born 1837

James Alford, born 1839

Andrew Alford, born 1842

Martha Alford, born 1844

Mary Alford, born 1846; died in infancy

Sarah Alford, born 1848

Nancy Alford, born 1851

Eliza Alford, born 1852

Abner Alford, born 13 January 1854 =

Joseph Alford, born 1857

Franklin Alford, born 1860 [great-grandfather of Don Alford, AAFA #59]

Mary Alford, born 1870

[See "Three Alford Brothers in Confederate Army," *AAFA ACTION*, June 1992, pp. 43-44, for the Civil War records of William, John, and Andrew.]

At the time this document was written, Dr. Alford was a practicing physician in Newhope, Pike County, Arkansas, age 52. He was a prominent member of this small village and was known as a man of wit and great sense of humor. He practiced medicine there for more than forty years. His wife, Harriet, died in 1906 (the year in which he wrote this document), and he died 14 May 1927 at the age of seventy-three.

Don Alford

FIFTY-THREE YEARS IN ARKANSAS

Written by Dr. Abner A. Alford in 1906

My friends, in writing this little booklet it is not my purpose to say anything in the least derogatory to my own native country, the State of Arkansas. Arkansas is the name I love. It is the land where I have had my joys and sorrows. It is the land where I spent my childhood days prattling around my mother's knee listening to her lullaby songs. It is where I found the loving companions of my youth, and in its earth are sleeping some of those nearest and dearest to me.

But dear readers, while some of this book may seem quite romantic and funny to you, it is filled with many sacred truths—truths that call to my memory many things in by-gone days that bring joy to my heart as well as those which cause gloom and sadness.

To return to the story of my life, I will say that on the 13th day of January, 1854, I landed in Pike County, Arkansas, about seven miles northeast of Murfresboro. Of course, if it had been left to my choice, I might have been born somewhere else. But, I was not consulted in this matter, things just happened as they did and I am here yet.

After remaining where I was born until the fall of 1856, my father moved to Montgomery County, twenty miles southwest of Hot Springs. This was before there was any Garland County. There we lived until the Fall of 1857. Father then sold his little claim, came back to Pike County and bought another claim on Bear Creek and settled down. It was there where I had most of my joys and sorrows. I had joy when I got a new garment, A new pair of shoes, or was lucky enough to go visiting somewhere. I had my sorrows when I stubbed my

toenail off against a rock or grub; or when my mother gave me a licking. On this little claim my older brothers began clearing and fencing and opening a farm.

Everything seemed to be going well. The mountains had an abundance of game such as deer, turkey, and bear. Panthers, wolves, and wildcats were also numerous at the time. The country was thinly settled, yet the people were kind and clever to each other. The men would walk six or eight miles to help each other roll logs. They also liked to raise houses (as we called it in those days). Since there were no lumber mills in the country, the people built their houses out of logs. They loved each other's company and such things as slander were not known at that time—especially among our good neighbors. They loved church worship. To think of those days with all of God's blessings that He had given them, such as a kind hearted people, a healthy country with plenty of game and fish, it seems that there could be nothing added to increase their happiness unless it had been good schools.

Yet, it is not every clear day that ends with cloudless skies. The year of 1860 (this was the year as is yet known as the "year for hot winds") was a considerable drawback to the settlers. Crops were short and corn was not high. It was in 1860 that the great disturbance began to take place between the states. In 1861, the first war gun and war whoop were heard! How well I remember the 4th of July that year at a big bar-b-que, when for the first time in my life I saw the Southern flag flying in the air, and heard them calling for volunteers to fight the yankees. I had four brothers, two uncles and two cousins who volunteered that day. All came home except one cousin who was killed before the close of the war. During the four long years of the war, father continued to live on the same old homestead on Bear Creek. I saw

many soldiers and thought I was getting well up on war life. I heard many guns fired by the soldiers and heard the big guns when the Federals captured Arkansas Post.

I never saw many people as strangers when I was a boy and was always full of "gab". I learned many war stories from the soldiers and, when they came around, they usually gave me a nickel or dime to sing for them. I would like to relate a funny little incident that occurred in connection with my singing. I had learned a song of which the chorus was: "Old Marmaduke he stole a horse, Oh then, Oh then". One day, it so happened that Colonel Marmaduke and his men had stopped at our house. One of the soldiers took me on his knee and gave me five cents to sing for him. My "Marmaduke Song" was the first that came to my mind and I began singing it. Then the soldiers began to yell, but the Colonel seemed to appreciate the joke too and tossed me a dime for my services!

In those days people had hard times. All the clothing was made at home. We tanned leather in burned out pine logs to make our shoes, and one pair a year was all we got. But I was a tough boy and didn't mind going barefooted since all the rest did. I thought, too, that I could do anything anybody else could do.

I remember one Christmas day, in 1863, there was a big snow on the ground. Father was making me a pair of shoes and I had a trap set to catch snow birds. I would watch him work on the shoes and, every now and then, take a peek at the trap.

When a bird would get caught, I would run out in the snow barefooted, take it out, set the trap again and rush back into the house. I will tell a little more about clothing and the manner of dress in those days later on.

It was now about the close of the war and those who were lucky enough to

come back were surely happy to get home.

In those days the woods were full of wild hogs since there had been no one to see after them during the war. So, the neighbors decided to get together and have a big day killing hogs. The day was set and all hands went, taking their ox teams and old tarpole wagons to take along barrels in which to scale the hogs as well as to haul their meat back. They had a good supply of pork and some two or three deer were killed. They really had a good size load and as they realized they were too heavily loaded they left some barrels to be picked up by my cousin and me later in the day. However, we waited until the next day when we yoked up Buck and Berry, our oxen, and went back after the barrels. We had to cross the mountain to get them which was quite a task with a yoke of oxen. But, we made it and after loading the barrels and starting down hill for home, the oxen ran away with us! Oh my, we had barrels and pieces of the wagon bed scattered from the top of the mountain to the foot—a distance of about a quarter of a mile.

ALFORD STARTS TO SCHOOL

At about this time, some of the neighbors said that we ought to have a school. But, there was no school house and some said that they didn't know what we would do for one since they did not have time to build one. It was suggested that they clean out the straw from an old out building where they had been whipping out some wheat over a log. So, they cleaned out the house and hired an old man, one of the neighbors, to teach the school. The only book we had was Webster's old blue back spelling book. He made all of us spell out loud so that he could tell what we were doing. You could have heard us for a quarter of a mile, and there was every kind of a voice from that of a song of the honey bee to the croak of a bull frog.

After we had gone to school a session or two, some of the more progressive ones said that they thought it would be a good thing to bring our school up to a higher standard and add another branch to our study. A council was called and it was decided to add on arithmetic with the understanding that as soon as spring opened up and the geese began to shed, so that we could have an ample supply of quills to make pens, penmanship was also to be added. In order to be ready, they began to make writing tables for us by boring holes in the walls in which to insert pegs and covering them with slabs that were cut out and dressed down. They had all the desks ready by the time the geese got in a fair way shedding and so there was no delay in the matter. This was indeed very fortunate since time was very precious to school children in those days. Our teacher told us that we did not need any black board or charts. He said that something like that showed ignorance on the part of the teacher, and that he should be able to teach without them before he was allowed to teach.

In the summertime when we got ready to study arithmetic, the teacher would tell us to take our slates and pencils and go outside and cipher a while. It so happened, in those days, that I thought I was a champion wrestler and if a new student came in and began to boast of his manhood, the first thing or the first time we would go out and cipher, I would take him off and test his skill

During this time, there was a little brown-eyed girl with light hair that I loved more than all the other students and, luckily, she loved me too. When I think of her it fills my heart with both joy and sadness. But I will speak of her again further on.

I will now turn back and tell of the manner of dress and making clothes at that time. But dear readers, don't think that I am trying to slur my native state, for I am now back in the happy days of my childhood.

As I have already told you, people made everything they wore at home. I wore out several case knives skinning the moss off the rocks in the mountains to dye wool thread with. It makes a very nice brown color. My mother made some very nice jeans cloth to be used in making me a new coat. I had already begun to think that it was time for me to begin seeing the girls anyway, and decided that would when I got me a new coat made. There lived an old lady about ten miles away who was considered an expert tailor. I carried my cloth to her to have my coat made, intending to see my best girl the next Sunday and, when I did, I would wear my new coat. The lady took something like a calf rope to take my measure with. She measured me in diameter, circumference, and length wise and said that she was going to cut and make my coat in the most up-to-date and latest style. She said that it would be a sack coat which it turned out to be. I had about six yards of cloth from which to make it and, when she finished it, there were but a few scraps left! I could have buttoned it around a two-year old colt! So, I never buttoned my coat while going with my girl; I had to keep the coattail knocked back with my arms so that I could walk. The front corners of the coat looked like sinkers had been sewed to them and they nearly tipped the floor! But, I thought I was flying and was some dude. I had a new coat, something that the other boys didn't have. And I was always first with the girls, too.

They made a kind of cloth in those days called single sleithed. This was to make men's underwear out of. It was white cloth, and well do I remember the first pair of drawers my mother made for me. I was then about fourteen years of age. It was winter time and I lay on my pallet in front of the fire all night without any cover looking at my new drawers. I might have frozen to death had there not been plenty of pine knots in the house.

In the summer, I wore hats platted out of straw. In winter, I wore caps made of

coon skin with the tail hanging down my back. My three neighbor boys, who lived six miles from me, wore the same. We must have looked like a bunch of wild animals when we got together!

I lived over in the Bear Creek settlement where they had a great many protracted meetings. At one of them one night an old lady got happy and lost her bonnet. She had to go home bareheaded. But that didn't bother her as she found what she was looking for.

Prayer meetings were held once each week at the neighbor's homes. Everyone turned out even though they lived several miles apart. Some people don't believe in prayer meetings, but I do. My father and mother were praying people and taught us that the family who prays together stays together. I remember one time, when I was a boy, I thought my time had come. My father had an old ram that was very bad to butt. One of my cousins and I were off away from the house one day and that old sheep happened to see us and seemed to say to himself, "Now is the time". At least, he made for us on a double quick time. We started to the house just as fast as we could run but the old ram was gaining on us at every jump. My heart was in my mouth and I thought that I had better pray that the Lord might change the ram's intentions. However, I couldn't think of anything to say except my Aunt's blessing and it was this: "Lord, make us thankful for what we are about to receive". I jumped behind a pine tree and the ram went right straight on. In a few more jumps he caught up with my cousin, landed square between his shoulders, and knocked him flat on the ground. With my heart thumping like horses feet running, I peeped around the tree and said, "Now ram, if you are willing, we will look to the Lord and be dismissed". About that time, my father saw us and came to our rescue....

People were very fond of going to church in those days. In the summer time, we boys would take our girls to

church on Sunday. We would walk five or six miles to church and back home the same day. In order to save the only pair of shoes which we owned, we took them off and carried them in our hands until we got near the church. We would then stop and take a bunch of horse mint or penny royal and whip the seed ticks off our legs, put on our shoes and stockings and go to church.

One summer there was a big protracted meeting close to our house and an old lady who lived four or five miles away was attending the meeting. As it happened, the fence around her farm was in bad shape and she had a stack of fodder in the field. That didn't worry her any. She said that she had turned everything over to the Lord to take care of while she attended the meeting. But, when she got back home after the meeting was over, she found that the cattle had destroyed her fodder. She said that it looked hard that the Lord would let the stock destroy her fodder while she was trying to carry on his work. I told her that the Lord was at church too, and that He didn't like being in the field by Himself and that I did not blame him. And, besides, I didn't believe that He was an expert cow puncher anyway....

You talk about hard times, I had them during the war. I was the only boy at home large enough to do any work and, of course, had it all to do. I did this no matter how tough the weather, cold or hot. Besides, there were a lot of fellows lying out in the woods to keep out of the war and I had to carry food to them. Now, those same fellows are drawing pensions from our government and I am getting nothing whatever for my services. I have always felt a little hard on the government for showing partiality in that way.

I learned to shoot a gun which was very necessary in those days. We all had them, too. I remember the first deer I ever killed. It was a large buck and I ran a mile and a half back home to reload my gun and tell my father about it. The

kind of guns we had in those days were the old human rifles. At least that's what we call them nowadays. We loaded them at the muzzle. They had flint rocks on them and that was the kind of gun I killed my first deer with. The lock was made so as to strike the flint rock against a piece of steel and that knocked fire. The spark fell into some powder that was in a little basin beside the breech of the gun barrel and went through into the barrel. This caused the gun to shoot. If your were not used to shooting one of them, you could dodge behind the corner of the house before it would shoot....

[The manuscript continues for several more pages, continuing with various stories that the author remembered hearing and describing religious groups that were prominent in his area. At that point, the manuscript ends. Don Alford reports that it is said that this is only part of a longer document, but the extent and location of the remainder are unknown.]

POSTSCRIPT

In Dr. Alford's narrative, he describes his surprise and the surprise of the Confederate troops when, in the midst of his child's rendition to them (after being promised a nickel!) of the song "Old Marmaduke" when "Colonel Marmaduke" arrived, listened to him, laughed and paid him a dime! It is interesting that attached to this old manuscript was the following article:

POISON SPRING BATTLEFIELD

If you drive 10 miles west of Camden, Arkansas, you will find, located just off state highway 24, the site of Poison Spring Battlefield. This battlefield is now preserved as a state park. Poison Spring is a memorial to the only victory won by the Confederates in the state of Arkansas.

A Federal forage train and its escort,

