Sly, Eugene Ripley

Section K, Block 95, Lot 2

On April 9, 1864, Eugene R. Sly received a journal[1] in which to record his thoughts. However, the thoughts he recorded in the journal were far from typical. When he received his journal Eugene was a Prisoner of War in Danville, Virginia. In six weeks he would be transferred to Andersonville Prison, one of the most notorious POW camps in the nation's history. The words he wrote give insight into the life of a Civil War prisoner and what it took to survive.



Eugene Sly

Eugene was born on December 27, 1842, in Gaylen, New York, to Seneca and Sallie Sly. Seneca worked as a lock tender on the Erie Canal. While still young Eugene and his family travelled by boat and covered wagon to an area just north of Joliet, Illinois. The Illinois and Michigan canal had been completed in 1848 and when the Sly family arrived, they purchased farmland right next to it. While Seneca considered himself a farmer, he did extra business selling wood that was taken by the ships where needed. Eugene's own early memories include watching the first ships come through the canal.

Eugene learned his work ethic early, both by watching his father and working alongside him while still a young boy. When not helping his father, Eugene attended school. On August 7, 1862, Eugene enlisted in the 100th Illinois Infantry, Company C, and took part in many battles with them. During the bloody Battle of Chickamauga he volunteered to tend the wounded. He and the other volunteers and wounded men were captured and, on September 20, 1863, Eugene began what would be 17 long months of life as a POW. The journal he kept shows the horrible conditions he and other men endured at Libby Prison, Danville Prison, Andersonville, and the Florence Stockade. Thousands of men—healthy upon entering—died of scurvy, starvation, infections, exposure, and untreated illness. Those who survived, including Eugene, lived with physical ailments brought on by their horrendous experiences long after they were freed.

Eugene began as a prisoner at Libby. Conditions in what was commonly known as the second worst Confederate prison camp included overcrowding—literally sleeping like sardines in the large rooms—and the constant company of lice and other vermin. Soon he was transferred to Danville, where smallpox ran rampant and prisoners averaged four feet of "personal space."[2] About six months into his stay he received his journal and at that point the character, strength, and hope for the future that Eugene used to survive his ordeal become apparent.

Eugene began consistently writing in his journal on April 9, 1864 and missed very few days until his final entry on December 31, 1864. His entries capture some of the futility and hopelessness that the prisoners endured, as well as some of the physical hardships they faced on a daily basis. Many men desperately hoped that they

1 The grammar is reproduced just as Mr. Sly wrote in his journal in 1864. There are many misspelled words and very little punctuation. Neither would have been his greatest concern at the time.

would soon be exchanged for Confederate POWs, but after seven months in captivity Eugene had already been disappointed enough in this regard to approach that hope realistically. His April 11 entry states,

> It was reported yesterday that a load of prisoners would leave Danville today but this morn the roll call man (as we call him) tells us that a bridge was washed away across the Dan R. But this is the same as all other reports we hear told for the purpose of keeping the boys quiet. The lies are with out no [number] that we are told, Better days ahead,

Despite the situation, Eugene was already preparing for his future outside of the prison walls. In his April 16th account he notes, "so I took my slate and pencil and solved a few problems in arithmetic." Not only did the work keep his brain active, but it also kept him from focusing on his situation.

On May 16th a transfer finally came. Like many of the men Eugene was eager to leave Libby and all of its discomforts behind. The men travelled for four days before arriving at their final destination: Georgia's infamous Andersonville Prison. Eugene's May 21 entry reads "…and such another place I never beheld I thought I had fared hard in the C [Company C] but I fear my suffering has not yet commenced The place is crowded and filthy and unfit for hogs to stay in There is between 13 and 15 thousand here and a harder lot I never saw. The mortality rate is from 20-30 per day. Disease Chronic diareah." Within a month Eugene himself began showing signs of scurvy, something he would battle for the rest of his life as a prisoner. Not willing to give in as many prisoners did out of hopelessness, Eugene did all he could in his power to fight it, making and selling pies to gain money to buy vegetables from the hawkers within the prison. He also worked daily on improving his shelter, a necessity if one wanted to survive.

> June 13 Cold and rainy this morn and after raining all day was still colder in the evening. The men that have no shelter are wet and cold and

Camp Sumter, or Andersonville as it became known as, opened in February of 1864 and quickly gained a reputation as the worst of the prison camps. It was approximately 16 acres of open land surrounded by a 15-foot wall; by June it was expanded to 26 acres and by August it had well over 30,000 prisoners, making it the 5th largest city in the Confederacy. The prisoners were underfed, overcrowded, and abused and neglected. Union soldier Lucius Barber wrote of what he saw when first taken to Andersonville.

> Its huge doors swung open to admit us and we were in the presence of—I do not know what to call them. It was evident they were human beings but hunger, sickness, exposure, and dirt had so transformed them that they more resembled walking skeletons, painted black…Such squalid, filthy wretchedness, hunger, disease, nakedness and cold, I never saw before…Poorly clad and worse fed, drinking filth and slime, from one hundred to three hundred of these passed into the gate of the eternal world daily. (*Don't Know Much About the Civil War,* p 353)

Andersonville had a mortality rate of 29% and while 13,000 soldiers were buried there, many more unrecorded prisoners also died from their imprisonment. After the war Henry Wirz, the overseer of Andersonville, was taken to trial and executed for crimes against humanity. He was the only Confederate soldier to receive such punishment.

there is no paralel to their suffering. They are dieing off by hundreds and will die by thousands if some thing is not done for them soon over one hundred have died in the last 22 hours. Rations 1/3 pint rice each

As time progressed, conditions worsened; on August 10 Eugene wrote that "The mortality is not less than 75 per day." He continued to fight for survival, talking of "commencing business" with a partner to earn money to buy vegetables so the scurvy would not keep gaining on him. Despite his best attempts his September 3rd entry read that he expected to be in the hospital crippled by the scurvy and colic he had been suffering from. Ten days later he transferred out of Andersonville to the Florence Stockades where, on September 20, he celebrated the dubious milestone of spending a full year as a Confederate POW.

One year today since I came into this (So called) Confederacy and as wonder would have it am Still alive. I would have thought it an impossibility to live one under year such treatment as I have received in the Confederacy. I can See no better prospect of geting exchanged this fall than there was a year ago. Not over 1/3 of the Chicamauga prisoners are now alive

Unlike many of the prisoners who lived day to day thinking and hoping they would be exchanged, Eugene began preparations to survive the upcoming winter. He wrote home asking for food and clothing and built a tent that even included a chimney. While working he noted that most of the prisoners would not make it to see the spring. His December 26th entry reflects the despair that he and the others are constantly feeling. "I arise this morning feeling very dissatisfied with my situation & Surroundings. my Christmas was very badly spent yesterday and my night in sad musings. Oh! How anxiously I look forward to the day when my time may be differently spent."

Eugene's final journal entry occurred on December 31, 1864. In February of 1865, he was transferred to Wilmington, North Carolina where he finally regained his freedom, a shell of the man he was before, still fighting scurvy and the results of malnutrition and exposure. He was officially mustered out of the army on May 25, 1865, having spent half of his military life as a POW.

After his discharge, Eugene returned to Will County and began farming. On December 16, 1868, he married Emma Jane Spicer and for the next seven years they ran a successful livestock and agricultural farm. Son Elliot was born September 3, 1869, followed by Homer on October 1, 1871, and Lorraine on March 26, 1874. In 1875 the Sly family moved to Lockport, Illinois where Eugene worked in the hay and straw pressing business alongside his brother Filmore. Eugene also spent some time in Lexington working for the Lockport Paper Company. It was during this time, on January 27, 1883, that daughter Ruth was born.


Eugene R. Sly

In 1884 Eugene moved the family once again, this time to Petoskey where his brother, the Reverend Winfield Sly, had lived since 1880. Eugene had bought land in the area earlier with the foresight that one day he would manufacture lime, and soon after the family arrived he began the Petoskey Lime

Company. According to *A Biographical History of Northern Michigan*, the business soon became "one of the leading industries in the lake region."

A "side effect" of the success of the Petoskey Lime Company was the establishment of the village of Bay Shore, of which Eugene is considered the founder. The headquarters of the business attracted many of its employees to settle near, and by 1892 Bay Shore had become a stop for the Chicago and West Michigan Railroad. Reverend Sly also founded the Rocky Beach Benevolent Association, an orphan home, in Bay Shore. As the Petoskey Lime Company continued to be successful it drew more people to the area, and soon Bay Shore had gained enough population to become a village, complete with a school, two churches, two stores, and a fire department.

Both Bay Shore and the Petoskey Lime Company benefitted from Eugene's attention to detail, foresight and managerial skills. As shown in his earlier journal entries, Eugene made sure that he was prepared for the future, examining each possible outcome before committing to something that could lead to folly. In 1899 Eugene's son Homer began working as a secretary for his father, and soon after the Petoskey Lime Company joined the Elk Portland Cement Company to form what would become the Bay Shore Lime Company.

Not long after his arrival in Petoskey many of the "discomforts" that Eugene had endured during his Civil War imprisonment began to worsen. He suffered from rheumatism and a weak heart, among other things, and by 1890 had begun drawing a pension. Despite these ailments he pulled from his strength reserves and continued what he thought of as his duty—working to the best of his ability. In 1911 he retired from the lime business and served as director of the First State Bank before moving to Benton Harbor to live with his daughter Lorraine in 1918. While there his illness began to worsen and he was soon confined to his bed. On May 28, 1922, he passed away.

With the illness and death of Eugene Sly, Petoskey lost a pillar of the community. He overcame adversity, both as a POW and in dealing with its aftereffects, to better his community. He was a respected businessman who used what he had learned during his wartime hardship to help him survive and become a success in the outside world. *A Biographical History of Northern Michigan* shows the respect in which people held him, calling him "a man who unites a high order of ability with courage, patriotism, clean morality and sound common sense, without stopping to think that his virtues are above the ordinary, doing thoroughly and well the work that he finds to do and asking praise of no man for the performance of what he conceives to be his simple duty." It is an appropriate final entry for the journal of Eugene Sly's life.

I wish Thee health
I wish Thee wealth
I wish Thee joy and ease
I also wish Thee still a wife
Through life Thy journey please.

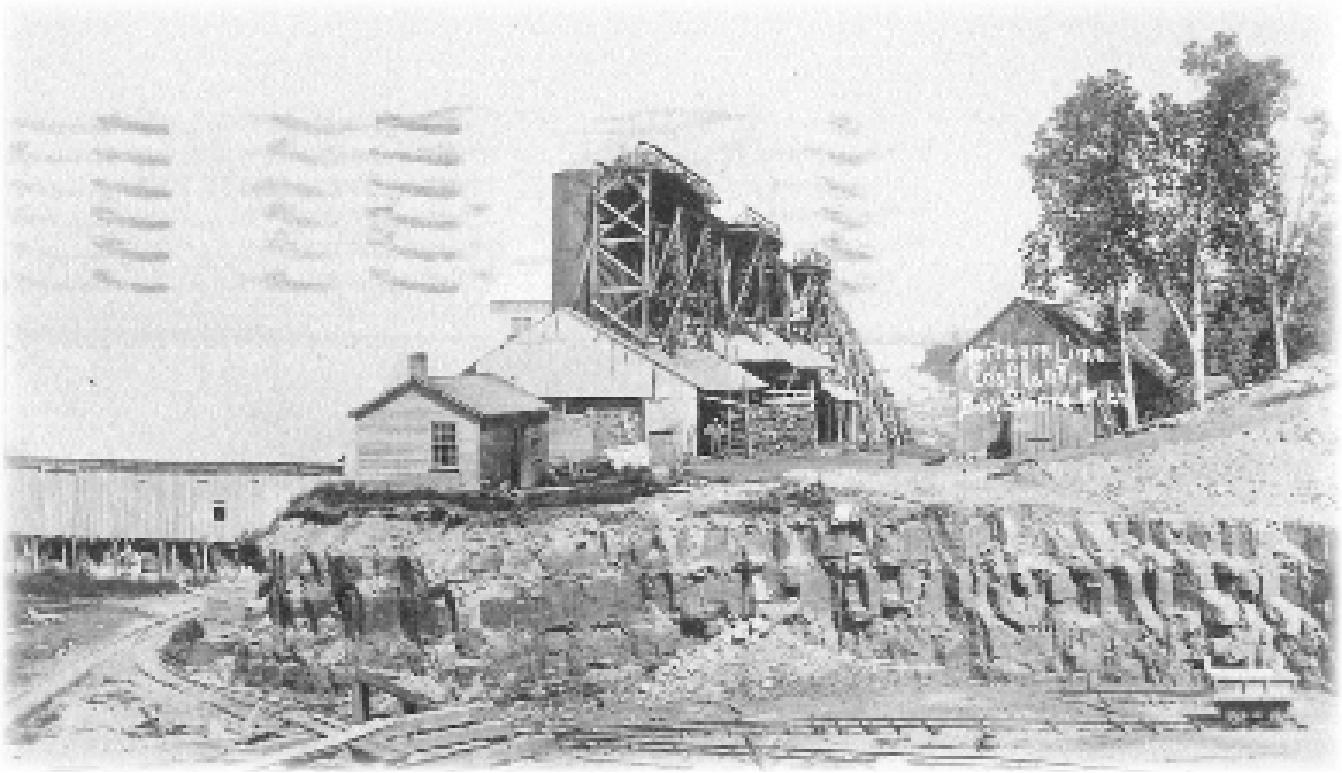
Eugene R. Sly
An undated entry in his journal[3]

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3 The quotes from Mr. Sly's journal are used by permission of Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections. Copyright 2006. The journal is available on their website or may be purchased from Greenwood Cemetery as part of *The Civil War Veterans - In Their Own Words.*



Eugene and Emma Sly
Had been married 53 years when Eugene passed away in 1922



Northern Lime in Bay Shore, Michigan
Photo Courtesy of Howard Ball