

# The sad life of substitute soldier Milton Kibler

By Herbert K. Russell

Milton Kibler was an orphan at three, a Union soldier and prisoner of war at eighteen, and a veteran with impaired health at nineteen. He married twice and fathered seven children before dying in 1910 in the Illinois Southern Hospital for the Insane at Anna. A great uncle of mine, he was illiterate but could make his mark.



Born in 1846 in Jasper County (county seat Newton), Kibler was raised by illiterate grandparents who farmed in Crooked Creek Township near Yale. When his grandfather's brother, Dayton Kibler, received his Civil War draft notice, eighteen-year old Milton enlisted for one year as his substitute. Mustered in at Olney on December 2, 1864, he was assigned to the 53rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment (Co. F) then making its way through Georgia on Sherman's March to the Sea. Private Kibler left Olney on his way to the 53rd Illinois but never arrived.

"On or about the 17th day of Dec. 1864, he was captured" near Franklin, Tennessee, and sent to the Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia, where he was sick for most of the next five

months. Polluted water gave him chronic diarrhea, and he experienced what seems to have been his first epileptic seizure. He might not have survived had it not been for the help of fellow prisoner Jerry C. Kelly, Company H of the 16th U.S. regulars, who cared for him when he was too weak to look after himself.

At war's end, Kibler headed home but had to pause at Louisville, where he was hospitalized. He may not have been present at the Springfield mustering out of the 53rd Illinois on August 14, 1865, for he later said he had no memory of that day—but it is clear that he received help from the Illinois State Sanitary Commission, whose purpose was to assist the sick and wounded. It gave him a receipt for his discharge certificate, which it used to collect "the amount due him from the Government on final settlement" of his pay. The discharge certificate was then returned to him. The receipt requested that "railroad officers" permit Kibler to travel at "government rates," at reduced fare or free.

## Marriage and Family Life

Kibler made his way back to Crooked Creek Township where he performed manual labor and probably worked on his grandparents' farm.



**Dr. James Finley Davison befriended Kibler and wrote letters supporting his disability claims.**

He also behaved as other teenagers and began a search for companionship, which brought him sixteen-year-old Lurinda Garrett, an unwed mother with one child. She and Kibler were married in 1866, and had a child of their own before the marriage ended in divorce in 1873.

Kibler's second marriage followed in 1874 when he married Nancy E. Leach. She was four years older and already had two children, but she also had a keen understanding of war's cruel vagaries: her brother Thomas had been accidentally killed on his way home from the war in June 1865 at the Union Army camp near Louisville (see "A Civil War Dog Tag," *Illinois Heritage*, May-June 2013).

In 1878, Nancy purchased from her relatives thirty-seven acres near Yale for \$150. The 1880 Federal



**This certificate from the Illinois State Sanitary Commission shows Kibler's birth year of 1846, the date his regiment was mustered out, and approves "final settlement" of his army pay.**

Census showed Milton Kibler's occupation as "farmer" and hers as a "wife ... keeping house." They had six children, but only one lived to old age, a daughter named Sarah Luna but generally known as *Dade*, about whom more below.

What the illiterate Kibler had needed most when discharged from service in the summer of 1865 was a friend to guide him through the red tape of pension guidelines. He could have qualified for veteran's benefits of \$8 per month for his intestinal disorder, but his pension file shows he did not file for benefits until April 17, 1882, when the Jasper County physician-attorney James Finley Davison interceded on his behalf.

What caused Dr. Davison to act when he did may have been the 1879 Arrears of Pension Act, which provided an injured military veteran a lump sum payout from the date he left the service to the date he applied for a pension. This act greatly increased the number of pension requests (not all wounded veterans applied for pensions, but more did so as the years went by). Just how many requests now flooded the Department of Interior's Pension Office is suggested by a letter Dr. Davison received in 1882: the "number of claims of [the] same class as yours now in progress of adjudication is about 360 thousand." Claims were "being settled at the rate of about 22 hundred per month." The doctor took an application number (446.523) and waited.

In 1883, Dr. Davison sought to speed the process with the help of Chicago war claims attorney Louis K. Gillson, who reported that Kibler's records were incomplete: "Your service is not shown in the Report of the Adjutant General of Illinois, and your discharge must be used as proof of your service." The discharge certificate was located, forwarded to Gillson, and the Department of Interior's Pension Office approved a pension (No. 397.379) of \$8 per month for Kibler's intestinal disorder in 1888—twenty-three years after he left the service.

It might be interpolated that lawyer Gillson was something of a war profiteer. Government guidelines stated



***A dog attacks a Union soldier at Andersonville on stationery of The National Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War, as shown on a letter from ex-POW Luther Paxson to Dr. Davison.***

that "the fee for the prosecution of a pension claim shall be \$10 only, unless a larger fee, not exceeding \$25, is agreed upon." Dr. Davison apparently felt he had a difficult claim and agreed to the larger fee, although it is not clear from family records and government lingo if Kibler ever received all the monies due him. In 1891, the War Department approved payment of "\$82.44 in settlement of your claim for arrears of pay, bounty, &c." When "fees and expenses" were deducted, Kibler's "share" was \$24.73. Meanwhile, attorney Gillson asked that the family send him postage stamps to cover the cost of communicating with them.

Dr. Davison also wrote letters seeking a pension for the onset of Kibler's epilepsy at Andersonville. The pension office balked at this, asking a question familiar to modern claimants: was this a *pre-existing condition*? As a poor relation in a poor county, Kibler had quite likely never seen a doctor before enlistment, and he could never prove he did *not* have epilepsy prior to enlisting. Dr. Davison offered to take depositions from local citizens who had known Kibler as a boy, but this idea went nowhere.

The best the doctor could do was

to secure affidavits from former Andersonville POWs to affirm that Kibler suffered from epilepsy while in prison. One of these was the aforementioned Jerry C. Kelly, who had looked after Kibler during his sickest days at Andersonville. Kelly had been disabled by scurvy while at the prison, and after the war he went on the lecture circuit as "The Andersonville Prisoner." A news clip among Kibler's papers shows Kelly was scheduled to speak on that subject in the Yale M.E. Church on a June evening of an unknown year.

Another Andersonville POW who provided an affidavit was Luther B. Paxson, then in Colorado and a member of The National Association of Union Ex-Prisoners of War. He wrote that Kibler was nicknamed "Keeler" for his tendency to keel over during his "fits," but this also failed to address the question of a pre-existing condition, and Kibler was never compensated for epilepsy.

Dr. Davison also asked sought the aid of "the G.A.R. boys" and Congressman J.B. Crowley for help with a "special pension" of \$72 per month, the amount given severely disabled soldiers. This yielded a reply from the Bureau of Pensions, but Kibler's monthly pension remained at \$8 per month until 1899 when he received a pay raise to \$12 a month for "chronic diarrhoea (sic) and resulting piles," less Attorney's Gillson's one-time fee of \$2. Kibler never did receive bonus money for enlisting as a substitute. (Jasper County did at least once offer such a bounty, but Kibler was not among the fortunate.) Relatedly, there is no family record that he received three months' extra pay for being a prisoner of war, although the Illinois State Sanitary Commission had distributed a circular regarding this by November 1865.

### **Hospital for the Insane at Anna**

Dr. Davison always supposed that Kibler's "mind was ruined . . . as a result of epilepsy contracted in the service." Whether this was true or not, Kibler's deportment occasionally upset his family, and he eventually behaved strangely enough to cause concern. In April 1900, he was admitted to the

Illinois Southern Hospital for the Insane at Anna. His wife Nancy died in 1902, and he saw little of his family in his last years.

The town of Anna, adjacent to the Lincoln debate site at Jonesboro, was on the mainline of the Illinois Central Railroad, but it was 150 miles from Kibler's hometown of Yale, and hospital stationery made it clear that outsiders were not welcome: "Visitors not allowed on Sundays or Hollidays [sic]." After arriving at Anna, correspondence concerning him invariably referred to him as "Milton Kibler (insane)." In January 1901, a letter from the hospital to his daughter Dade noted that Kibler had not experienced recent convulsions but that his doctor regarded him as a "childish and peevish" patient who might be furloughed but could not be discharged: "We do not consider him recovered."

After Kibler was settled in the asylum in Anna, his daughter Dade married Dr. Davison's son John, who replaced his father as Kibler's guardian. The couple set up housekeeping in the Jasper County village of Hidalgo, but John was not as careful as his doctor-father and lost Kibler's military discharge certificate. Kibler died in 1910 of heart disease and "chronic diffuse nephritis" and was returned to Yale for burial beneath a commercial (non-military) headstone. His story was buried with him.

One wonders if John and Dade never had children of their own because of a concern that her father's epilepsy or insanity might be inherited. Epilepsy was still looked upon as a family shame akin to madness in some areas, and being institutionalized and labeled "insane" carried a formidable social stigma. In any event, by the 1920s and perhaps before, John and Dade had begun helping several nieces and nephews, while shielding them




***Milton Kibler's daughter Dade hid her father's insanity and epilepsy from younger family members—but saved documents that told his story.***

from her father's mental and physical problems. They did this so well that it was decades before the younger generation learned of Milton Kibler's epilepsy, insanity, and incarceration.

A century ago—in the days of dirt roads and long walks to country schools—it was fairly common for children in rural areas to stay with a relative in town and attend its school. One of those who stayed with John and Dade in Hidalgo during her grade school years was my late mother, Velva Davison Russell (b.1915), who went to live with them when she was nine. Few country children went on to high school at that time, so it was a special privilege when John and Dade provided money for my mother's room and board to attend high school in Newton. She graduated in 1933, after which she left the area to pursue her own life.

In the 1960s, my mother inherited her Aunt Dade's few possessions, including a packet of 80-plus documents marked "Milton Kibler." She recognized the surname—the Kiblers were a numerous brood—but she did not learn that Private Kibler was her aunt's father until many years later when she studied the materials as she put her own affairs in order. She summarized her surprise in a large note addressed to me: "This man was my Aunt Dade's father. This was 'news' to me in January 1978." Her brother Lloyd was also surprised. She signed the note, placed it with Kibler's papers, and left it for me to discover as I would.

Kibler's 1865 "final settlement" of army pay, related records, and POW affidavits would seem to confirm details of his service, but there are many lacunae in his story, most notably the facts of his capture. His name is not in Andersonville's database of prisoners (there is no complete list). Kibler is also faceless, for he seems never to have had his picture taken, unless one is among the sealed records of the Illinois Southern Hospital for the Insane in Anna (now the Choate Center).

Family and governmental documents and pertinent online hard copy regarding Private Kibler will be donated to the Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. 

*ISHS member Herbert K. Russell has edited and provided an introduction to W.S. Blackman's Civil War narrative The Boy of Battle Ford and the Man (1906; rpt. Southern Illinois University Press 2012), the only extended, published account of the 120th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment.*

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