

There was no surrender for this Civil War soldier

York County man said Reconstruction was harder than the conflict

On April 9, 1865, Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered his army of 26,675 men to Gen. Ulysses Grant.

Presumably, William Thomas "Uncle Tom" Hartness of Sharon, York County, was one of those men. In December 1925, at the age of 81, he announced to the world that he did not surrender and added that he had never told a soul before.

No one doubted Hartness' word. He was described as a man whose eye was clear and his step firm. He had a remarkable memory of fine details. A reporter from the Yorkville Enquirer observed "...he could put the average high school history teacher of this modern age to shame in a historic contest."

Hartness remembered many of the old camp songs and would sing them "in a voice a little cracked and little shrill and broken...[but with] an amazing amount of pep and vim and vigor."

Explaining why he didn't surrender, Hartness said, "The night before the surrender, we were all ready to give ourselves up. And the boys was a-saying as how we might have to lie up in prison for a long time with no guarantee of rations or nothing else. I was already mighty hungry and I knowed that if I could get back home why there was something

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to eat there and a plenty for me to do ... everybody knowed that the fighting was finished. I had been wounded three times besides."

Hartness and several friends "grabbed the tail end of that freight." The train was well-guarded and several times they were knocked off by guards but because the train was so slow they would catch up to it and hang on. Hartness got off in Greensboro, N.C., and began walking to his Sharon home.

Looking back, Hartness said the war was hard but for him Reconstruction was worse. He had no money but, nevertheless, married Susan Lucas. They moved to the Smyrna community where he built a "rude shanty."

To show how rough it was in those years, Hartness told of his attempt to build another room to the shanty. He was cutting logs one afternoon and broke his axe. He had invited friends to help him with the "house raising." With a broken axe and an insufficient amount of logs cut, Hartness walked to a store two-and-a-half miles away. He had \$1.15 in his pocket. The storekeeper told him that axes were \$1.25 and refused to credit him for the extra dime.

"Saying not a word, he trudged back to his home, had his wife gather all the eggs she could find and, putting them in a basket, he walked to the store again. The

eggs made the difference ... The house raising was held that night according to schedule."

In 1880, there was a land boom in Mississippi. Hartness heard about it and decided to sell his small farm and move his family to that state. Taking two covered wagons and their household furniture, the family set out. Hartness walked nearly every step of the way.

It turned out that within three years, Hartness was able to make a good bit of money. In 1883, he decided to come back to York County. The furniture went back on the wagons and again he walked back beside his teams. In 1925, the reporter wrote, "Through hard work and the exercise of good business judgment he long ago acquired a competence and more. In fact his check for several figures would be honored anywhere ..."

At age 82, "Uncle Tom" was still walking with vigor. He thought it nothing to walk five or six miles to see a friend. His daughter Eliza kept house for him and they both enjoyed entertaining their many friends.

The article on William Thomas Hartness concluded with: "He doesn't worry. He tries to see the bright side of everything, and regardless of what has come in the way of joy and sorrows, he has refused to recognize the demand to surrender, ever since he refused to be a party to the great surrender at Appomattox in 1865."

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