

AN INCIDENT IN THE RECONSTRUCTION DAYS OF ALABAMA.

The Wild Run From Montgomery to Decatur

Made by Capt. C. H. Beale with the Cal

Wagner Minstrel Company.

When the noted Sumner Civil Rights bill was passed by Congress soon after the Civil War, everyone of that time remembers the effect it had in good old Alabama which had been cursed and scourged by ignorant members of her Legislature which was composed of negroes, scalliwags and carpet-baggers.

On March 11, 1875, Wagner's Minstrels appeared in Montgomery. The negroes, backed up by this obnoxious Bill, tried to exercise what they claimed was "their rights", by taking seats in theatres and trains alongside the whites. On this occasion they passed the word that they would buy seats in the theatre with the whites, when heretofore they had always been excluded to the gallery. Wagner's agent had instructions not to sell tickets to negroes anywhere but for the gallery, but by some chicanery they got the tickets in the dress circle, among Montgomery's fairest daughters. The question then was, how to remove them without frightening the ladies. When the curtain went up, the Company marched in and took their seats for the Overture, Wagner sitting on the end with tambourine in hand. Casting his eyes over the audience, he saw ^{the} negroes in the dress circle and knew at once this would never do, so he put down his tambourine, advanced to the footlights, and announced that there were negroes in the dress circle and they would please vacate and go to the gallery where they would find good seats, and the performance would commence. Well, you could have heard a pin fall; Southern men stood with bated breath, ready to back Wagner. The negroes did not move - a game of bluff, but it did not count in that game. Wagner waited patiently, still the negroes made no move to vacate. Wagner left the stage and returned quickly with pistols in hand, saying to the whites: "Ladies and gentlemen, stand aside; I will clear the dress circle of those colored gents. Pandemonium reigned; men were on their feet instantly, and the negroes went out of that dress circle kicked and cuffed, and made a hasty

retreat to the street. The performance then commenced, and much praise was given "Happy Cal".

Next day trouble commenced for Wagner, as negroes commenced swearing out warrants for Wagner before the United States Commissioner. N. S. McAfee of Talladega was United States District Attorney; Capt. J. W. Dimmick was United States Commissioner. Wagner and his agent, Brown, were ably defended by Col. H. A. Herbert, Col. Tucker Sayre, Col. Virgil Murphy, Judge David Clopton - all volunteering their services-and Col. Herbert making a telling speech on the unconstitutionality of the Civil Rights Bill. The commissioner held with the attorney, and refused to issue any more warrants; then the negroes swore out more warrants before another Commissioner, Barber by name. This threw Montgomery into a state of excitement; men with stern faces and determination promised to back Wagner and see this thing through; the streets were crowded with both negroes and whites, expecting trouble any moment. Cal Wagner was in Col. Tucker Sayre's office which was over Blount Weatherly's drugstore facing Court Square. He was surrounded by his friends who were considered how to get him out of the city before the U. S. Marshalls could serve warrants on him. Dr. Walter Jackson, who was in the drugstore at the time, was called into the office to consult with them. His buggy and fast horse were standing in front of the drugstore. When asked if he could not get Wagner out of the city quickly he replied:

"Yes, I can get him away from here with lightening speed."

"Well, what is your plan?"

He replied: "It is this: Wagner, you walk down the steps and get into my buggy and drive to the corner of Lee and Montgomery Streets. I will walk up there and get in, and take you over to Cad Beale - you all know him - and he will run him out of town on an engine." Cad Beale was then M.M. of the South and north division of the L. & N. at Montgomery.

Sayre said: "Tell Cad to get him out quick, we send him."

The negroes tried to flank Dr. Jackson's movements, though with a fast horse he dodged them, skirted the city, and made the shops in the northern part where Cad Beale was, and the story was quickly told to him. No sooner said that he was to the rescue.

One of his switch engines was standing there, and he said: "Jump up, quick, Mr. Wagner." He sprang to the throttle, and flying with Wagner, left Dr. Jackson on the ground, in consternation. And it was said afterwards by Jackson, "That d--- fellow Beale will break his and Wagner's neck yet."

Beale took Wagner across the Alabama River, which is five miles north of Montgomery and left Wagner with the bridge-keeper, Smith. He then returned to Montgomery to get the company and baggage. The baggage was piled at the old depot of the Montgomery & West Point railroad on North Court Street. He took a box car and loaded the baggage, and while doing so the negroes asked him what he was going to do with it. He replied that the streets were so muddy they could not haul it, so he was going to take it across the commons to the foot of Commerce Street where they would unload as they were going to perform in the city that night. In the meantime he had sent a messenger to Mr. Marsden, Wagner's manager, and the attorneys, to have the band and company parade, and march down Commerce Street, where he would be with coach, baggage car and engine, and for the company to enter the coach and at a given signal he would run away with, which was most successfully accomplished, leaving a gang of negroes gaping at the daredevil act.

Before leaving the city limits with the train another obstacle presented itself; one of the company crawled over the box car and told Beale that an officer was in the coach. But Beale was ready for the emergency; he stopped his engine, walked back to the coach, and said to Marsden: "Count your men; this is a chartered train, and no one allowed except this company." In counting them, Marsden came to a deputy U. S. marshall by the name of Williford, who was looking for Wagner and said this man did not belong to the company, so Beale told Williford he would have to get off. He refused to do so, and Beale called two of his assistants who were in yard service under him, by the names of Dennis O'Connor and Wm. Bennett, and ordered them to take Williford off but not to hurt him. The latter exposed his pistols; but Bennett and O'Connor laughed at him, and said, "Partner, come get off without any trouble, as you might get hurt if you raise those coattails too high; some one might kick them off."

He was ejected from the train, at the same time notifying Beale he would attend to him when he returned to Montgomery, and Beale laughingly told him he "would dine there to-morrow." It was then between 5 and 6 P.M.

Away sped Beale with the minstrels, picking up Wagner at the bridge, and stopping at Elmore he had the train dispatcher at Birmingham wired to close all telegraph offices on the line and to give him a clear track to Decatur.

Not knowing the road, he was flying with the engine in darkness, down hill and around curves, all the time looking for Sand Mountain which was a very steep grade with the fall toward Decatur, when Wagner, who was riding in the cab with him, sitting on the opposite side, came over to him saying: "Mr. Beale, let me ride on your side awhile, as my side is running much faster than yours." Not till then did Beale realize that he was on the down grade of Sand Mountain with 140 lbs. of steam, throttle wide open and the lever cut back to 7" on the quadrant. Beale said he was looking for a station called Wilhites at the foot of the mountain, and when he got to it he saw both switch stands north and south at the same time, he passed them so rapidly.

This run was made in the dark with a locomotive with 15" cylinder and 4-1/2 foot drivers, and the 180 miles was made in 5 hours and 45 minutes, and water was taken at water tanks in between stations.

This run and race is often spoken of in Alabama as the "Wagner Race for Civil Rights." Wagner has since left the minstrels, though is still living, and is assistant passenger agent of the Northern Pacific in the far West. Capt. J. W. Dimmick, Dr. Walter Jackson, and C. H. Beale still reside in Montgomery, and Col. H. A. Herbert, ex-Secretary of the Navy, resides in Washington, and it is sad to know that such men as Clopton, Sayre and Murphy have passed over the River.

(From the original manuscript in the hands of Capt. C. H. Beale, Montgomery, Alabama, 1916.)