

Tequesta:

Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants

By RAY B. SELEY, JR.

Most readers of Florida history have come across the story of how the third phase of the Seminole Wars was started in December of 1855, when the soldiers "chopped down the banana plants, just to see Old Billy cut up," and how Billy Bowlegs retaliated by attacking the party next morning. The incident changed the pattern of the efforts of the United States Government to send the Seminoles to the Indian Territory and should not be dismissed so lightly. For several years before the attack a system of pressure tactics had been used in the attempt to persuade the Seminoles to emigrate to the Indian Territory.¹ Increasing numbers of troops were placed on the frontier, military roads and outposts were built and more citizens were allowed to occupy the areas vacated by the Indians. At the same time, the Indians were urged to migrate by some of their brethren who were brought from Indian Territory for that purpose, and rewards were offered for the capture of Indians. Following the attack, open hostilities broke out, ending in 1858 when all but a few of the remaining Seminoles had been captured and sent to Oklahoma.

The Military records indicate that the story of the destruction of the banana plants has no foundation in fact. While there is mention of some soldiers taking bananas from a deserted village, it appears likely that the Indians making the attack did not know it. When advised that the first small military patrol of the new dry season was proceeding along the road to the outposts established during the previous winter, Bowlegs probably ordered

¹ James W. Covington, "The Indian Scare of 1849," *Tequesta*, Number XXI, 1961 contains a discussion of government policies and status of the Indians during this period.

a party of warriors to watch their movements. The route of the Indians from their home near Royal Palm Hammock to the site of the attack would not likely have taken them through the deserted village.

The story of the destruction of the banana plants stems from the pen of Andrew P. Canova, private in the Volunteers, who wrote a series of interesting letters to his home town newspaper at Palatka, describing his adventures and explaining to the folks back home why he had come to south Florida to fight the Indians. Later, with the help and urging of friends, he added an introduction and some other stories which were published as a pamphlet in 1855. His introductory remarks tell the story of the banana plant episode. He was not present at the attack but joined the Volunteers in 1856.²

By 1854, posts had been established for some time at Fort Meade, Fort Dallas, Fort Brooke at Tampa Bay, and an outpost at Fort Myers, among others, and preparations were made to advance the frontier of white settlement to the south, on the west side of Lake Okeechobee. In December, 1853, George Lucas Hartsuff, 2nd Lieutenant, 2nd Artillery, was transferred from the Eighth Department of the Army, at Fort Brown, Texas, to arrive in Florida some months later.

Hartsuff was born at Tyre, New York, on the 28th of May, 1830, and moved to Michigan with his family in 1842. In 1848, he secured an appointment to the Military Academy, and graduated in 1852, in nineteenth place in a class of forty-three members.³ After a month at Governor's Island, he went with a detachment of recruits to join his Company at Fort Brown, Texas. Here he was engaged most of the time in scouting and escort duty. Under confidential orders from Department Headquarters, he made an examination of the Rio Grande Valley from Rio Grande City to the Gulf to find suitable locations for posts at a time when there was threatened difficulty with Mexico concerning the Messila Valley.⁴

² Andrew P. Canova, *Life and Adventures in South Florida*, Tribune Printing Company, Tampa, Florida, reprinted 1906.

³ George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy*, Vol. II, page 484-490.

⁴ National Archives, *Records of the War Department*, "Office of the Adjutant General, Appointment, Commission and Personal Branch," 2557 ACP 1871.

In the fall of 1853, Yellow Fever ravaged the whole Gulf coast. Hartsuff was extremely ill during the month of December, and was granted two months leave which was extended three months longer for him to recuperate. Returning to duty in June, he was ordered to join his company and arrived at Fort Meade on July 1, 1854.⁵

In April and May of 1854, Lt. Henry Benson had examined the country between Fort Meade and Fort Thompson, and between Fort Meade and a point opposite Fort Myers on the Caloosahatchee with a view to making roads.⁶ In October, Lieutenant Hartsuff examined the country between Lieutenant Benson's blazed route and Peas Creek.⁷ Lieutenant Benson, meanwhile, explored the route for a road from Fort Thompson to the ford on Thlathlopka-hatchee, or Fisheating Creek, and the rest of the route from Fort Meade around the headwaters of Fisheating Creek to Fort Thompson.⁸

On the second of November, Major Lewis Golding Arnold was ordered to move his command from Fort Meade to Fort Thompson, making a road as he went. The re-activation of Fort Thompson was the beginning of five months of extensive study and exploration of the area south of the Caloosahatchee, and attempts to find routes across the Everglades to connect Fort Dallas and Fort Capron with the west coast.

Lieutenant Hartsuff left Fort Thompson December fifth to explore the country between the Thathlopopka south down the shore of Lake Okeechobee and back along the Caloosahatchee. He found that he could get no nearer the lake than five miles with his wagon, but learned the extent of the marsh bordering the lake. Returning on December eighth, he was ordered to examine the south bank of the Caloosahatchee and continue along the shore of the lake. Two days sufficed to convince him that it was of the same character and that it was "totally unfitted for human habitation."⁹

In the early part of January, 1855, parties were sent to make further explorations. Lt. Thomas McCurdy Vincent left Fort Thompson to explore

⁵ National Archives, *Memo Book, Headquarters Troops in Florida*, Series II, Vol. 16, page 11, RG98.

⁶ National Archives, *Records of the Department of Florida*, "Letters Received, Florida," RG98, B 6 1854.

⁷ *Ibid.* H 19 1854.

⁸ *Ibid.* B 11 1854.

⁹ *Ibid.* Enclosure with 64 M 1855.

Fisheating Creek. Taking a boat, he launched it at the first place where he could approach the banks, descended to the site of old Fort Center, continued to its mouth, and explored the lake shore for a few miles on each side. He found only marsh and the only solid ground at the site of Fort Center and at the place where he launched his boat.¹⁰

Lieut. Stephen H. Weed explored the Caloosahatchee River from Fort Myers and found it navigable for large size boats as far as Fort Deynaud.¹¹ Lieutenant Hartsuff explored some thirty or more miles to the southeast from Fort Thompson and found he could not approach closer than a mile to Lake Okeechobee because of the marsh, and found only one site where a blockhouse might be built. He followed an Indian trail northward to where it crossed the Caloosahatchee and recognized the crossing as the place he had been the month before when exploring the north side of that river.¹²

Colonel Harvey Brown arrived at Fort Myers on January 12th with six companies of recruits for the 2nd Artillery, and assumed command of the troops south of the Caloosahatchee. On January 20th, instructions were issued to him to build a blockhouse at Fort Deynaud, one on the opposite bank of the river, one at the site of old Fort Center, and one on the east side of Lake Okeechobee. A blockhouse was to be erected at the site of old Depot No. 1, at the head of the Big Cypress, one at Punta Rassa, and additional storehouses at Fort Myers. Roads were to be built to connect these posts, and to be extended southeast to the Everglades. These works were to occupy the rest of the dry winter season. ¹³

To Major William Hays was given the work at Fort Deynaud and Fort Center.¹⁴ Captain Henry Clay Pratt was ordered to build the road from Fort Myers to the head of the Big Cypress about forty miles southeast, find a suitable site and erect a blockhouse.¹⁵

Lieutenant Hartsuff was appointed Topographical Engineer on January 22nd, and ordered to accompany Captain Pratt. His instructions from Colonel Brown were, in part:

¹⁰ Ibid. 1/64 M 1855.

¹¹ Ibid. 2/64 M 1855.

¹² Ibid. 3/64 M 1855.

¹³ Ibid. 3/54 M 1855.

¹⁴ Ibid. 4/54 M 1855.

¹⁵ Ibid. 5/54 M 1855.

"I have selected you to perform the duties of Topographical Engineer, to survey the country in the vicinity of the Big Cypress Swamp & Everglades, in connection with the parties to be sent to cut roads from this post & to build forts at such places as may be selected . . . The chief objects to which you will direct your attention besides the general geography of the country and the marking out of roads, will be the finding and conspicuously marking pine islands, hammocks, & other high grounds where troops can be encamped in the summer, or in the wet season, water courses, streams, ponds and wells where water can be provided in winter . . . You will also note the quantity of arable land and its quality that you may discover, where and how located and as you will have seen & reconnoitered nearly all the practicable country south of Fish Eating Creek, you will please give the results of your observations, as to its value & capability of supporting a civilized population . . ."16

Lieutenant Hartsuff went with Captain Pratt, helped with the selection of a site for the blockhouse, which was named Fort Simon Drum. He explored to the southeast for a few days and then blazed a trail northward to Fort Deynaud. On February 16th, the blockhouse was finished and Captain Pratt's command was relieved by Captain Arnold Elzey and his company. Accompanied by Hartsuff, Elzey proceeded eastward towards the Everglades, and selected Waxy Hadjo's landing as the site for his blockhouse. It was named Fort Shackelford.¹⁷ From there, Hartsuff explored south along the Everglades three miles, which was as far as conditions would permit. To the northward, he reached the area he had explored in early January.

Finding the country south of Fort Shackelford too difficult, it was decided to continue explorations from Fort Drum. A supply depot was established 18 miles southeast of that base. From there, Hartsuff explored the country to the east and south. He found several Indian villages, including those of Assunwa and Billy Bowlegs, who were both friendly and visited the encampment of the troops. The explorations from there reached the area explored from Fort Shackelford.

¹⁶ Ibid. Enclosure with 116 M 1856, Report of reconnaissance, Hartsuff, June 18, 1855, and 7 B 1855.

¹⁷ Ibid. Enclosure with 7 B 1855, Elzey to Brown, February 26, 1855.

In April, Hartsuff explored to the southwest from Fort Drum, finding old Fort Keais, but was unable to find the site of Fort Foster. A base camp was established eighteen miles southwest from Fort Drum, and explorations extended towards the Gulf of Mexico. Parties on foot were able to penetrate to Malco River (now Marco River or possibly Henderson Creek), but it was not possible to find a route suitable for a wagon road.

The arrival of the spring rains terminated the operations in early June. The supply depots and Forts Shackelford and Drum were abandoned for the season, and the troops went back to Fort Myers and Fort Deynaud. On June 18th, Hartsuff submitted his report and maps. Following are excerpts from his nineteen page report.

“On my arrival at Fort Deynaud after an absence in the swamp of more than three months, my field duties as Topographical Engineer ended. The map accompanying this I have made full and complete as possible with the limited means in my power, and to it I must refer you, for any information of the country, not contained in this report. There is not a trail or road represented that I have not passed over . . .”

“For agricultural purposes, I can conceive of no country not entirely a barren waste, more utterly & wholly worthless than this. The only portion, that can be made at all productive are the hammocks which are small few & scattered, for all other purposes it is in my opinion equally valueless to a civilized population. It can never be occupied except in the same manner as the Indians who occupy it. For them in consequence of their peculiar habit & wants it is habitable & considering its resources *to them* both for subsistence & concealment, and the smallness of their number, as a stronghold in case of hostilities, it is impregnable.

“There are dense tangled hammocks, thickets, lily ponds, etc., innumerable in which every part of their nation might baffle the search of our whole army. They have a large number of hogs, some cattle, their storehouses contain more or less corn & they seem to have plenty of powder and ball. There are cabbage trees alone in the swamp provided they had no other means of subsistence, sufficient to last them a century & to prevent them from obtaining food

from the coast in fish oysters etc., would require a force in boats throughout its whole extent from Punta Rassa to Cape Sable. Their perfect system of espionage and signal fires, will effectually prevent their ever being taken by chance or accident. Considering all this & keeping in view the result of a former expedition in the same country by a large force, led by experienced guides in which after a long and severe campaign, two soldiers were killed & not an Indian seen, I think I may be justified in asserting that if the Indians are properly led, I would engage to take Sebastopol in the same time and with the same number of men that I would require to forcibly expel them."¹⁸

Further explorations would have to wait for the end of the rainy season. From June to November, in an average year, water covers much of the area. The land is essentially flat. Except for occasional pine islands a few inches higher than the surrounding area, the ground will not support the hooves of horses or wagon wheels. The heavy rainfall usually ceases in October, and a few more weeks must elapse before the ground dried sufficiently to permit exploring parties to take the field. Early in December, Colonel Brown issued orders to Hartsuff; “. . . you will proceed to Fort Simon Drum, and from thence to Fort Shackelford, and those parts of the Big Cypress Swamp explored last year, and will examine their present condition; whether the forts are in good order and have not been disturbed; and the country as to water, cultivation and provisions of the Indians and more particularly, whether inhabited now or at any time during the winter by them; in what numbers, and whether and to what extent they have planted.”¹⁹

Hartsuff left Fort Myers on December 7th, 1855, with six mounted men, two foot soldiers, and two teamsters driving two wagons drawn by mules. They encamped the second night about thirty miles southeast of Fort Myers, and on the third day, while exploring, saw an Indian man and a boy

¹⁸ Ibid. Copy of report of reconaissance, George L. Hartsuff, enclosure with 116 M 1855. The map, opposite page 26, Memoirs of Major Frances N. Page, Series II, Vol. 8, Records of the Department of Florida, RG98, appears to be the original by Hartsuff. L89-7, RG77, bears the signature of “H. C. Pratt, Capt. 2nd Arty., 1856,” and appears to be a working copy. L89-3, March 1857 and L89-6, were drawn by Captain J. W. Abert, probably in the course of preparation for L89-1, April 1857, which is a large map of Florida on tracing paper, encompassing the information from Hartsuff’s map and report.

¹⁹ Ibid. 49 B 1855.

herding hogs. The Indians tried to avoid the soldiers and showed no disposition to give any information. The next day the scouting party found Fort Simon Drum had been burned. They proceeded to Fort Shackelford and found it burned also. Two days examination of the country and deserted Indian villages, and the trails overgrown with weeds convinced them there had been no Indians in the vicinity in recent months. Returning to Fort Drum, they went southeast and encamped on the night of December 17th on a pine island, in the vicinity of the supply depot used the previous spring. On the 18th, they went to Billy Bowlegs' camp of the previous year and found it deserted, with untended vegetables growing where previous gardens had been. Private William Baker, in his statement says, "they saw no one there; some of the party took a bunch of bananas." On the 19th, they visited some other Indian villages but these also were deserted and they found no signs of the presence of Indians.²⁰

Having been told the evening before that they were to return to Fort Myers, the teamsters rose early on the morning of Thursday, the 20th, to harness the twelve mules, and the rest of the men were called shortly thereafter. Private Otto Hersch cooked breakfast and fed the men, and while he was packing the equipment the others started to saddle their horses. Baker was preparing breakfast for Lieut. Hartsuff who was dressed and had washed and was combing his hair. Sergeant Holland and Corporal Williams were on the far side of the pines with their horses. Hanna and Murtagh were saddling their horses near the wagons. The teamsters and two other men were lounging near the fire. Suddenly, shots rang out, accompanied by war whoops. A party of Indians had approached to within a few yards undetected. The men near the fire fell instantly.

Upon seeing the Indians, Hanna and Murtagh fired their own guns and finding three others nearby, fired these also. Hanna was wounded and Murtagh sought protection under the wagon. After firing once more, Hanna followed to the wagon.

²⁰ Ibid. 59 B 1855. The sequence of the scout and skirmish are reconstructed from the reports of the survivors. The cover endorsement states that 59 B 1855 contained thirteen enclosures. Some of the enclosures were forwarded to the Adjutant General's Office, with 15 M 1856, Letters Received, AGO, RG94. No statement of Private Ernest Bordsedh, of Company "K," was found. He was not listed as among those killed, nor among those who escaped uninjured. The extent of his injuries is not known.

When Baker saw the Indians, he dropped the officer's breakfast, seized his musket, fired once and then ran to the wagon to join Hanna and Murtagh. Hersch, by himself, packing the mess equipment, fired at an Indian and fell to the ground. After reloading, and seeing no more of the soldiers, he endeavored to escape in the high grass. Holland and Williams had left their muskets behind. They retreated to cover around the edge of a nearby hammock.

Meanwhile, Hartsuff from the door of his tent, fired his revolver with effect at close range at Indians whose attention was directed towards the wagons, and after receiving a wound in the arm, ran to the wagon. After five minutes of fighting Hartsuff found his command reduced to three privates, one wounded, and himself with a broken arm.

After firing a few rounds, Murtagh fell with a wound in the abdomen, and Baker was disabled by a ball striking his knife, bending it, and severely injuring his thigh. Hanna, whose wound had been less serious, continued to fight. Hartsuff fired with his right arm, while Baker loaded the guns for him. A ball struck the lieutenant's revolver in its holster and the pain and shock disabled him for a few minutes. After receiving a third wound, a ball in his chest, Hartsuff decided to give up the fight. He ordered Baker and Hanna to retreat and tried to reach a hammock twenty yards away.

Baker loaded two rifles for Hanna, and then retreated. Hanna fired the loaded guns, passed Hartsuff and overtook Baker, and they made good their escape. Approximately sixty-five miles from the nearest help, both wounded, and low on ammunition, the two men started making their way to Fort Myers.

Expecting pursuit on horseback, they avoided the road to escape detection, until within three miles of Fort Drum. When they reached the Fort Drum to Fort Myers road, they still had forty-five miles to go. Late in the afternoon of Friday, they came to a camping area fifteen miles from Fort Myers used previously by troops. Baker, completely exhausted, stayed there. Hanna reached Fort Myers about seven o'clock that evening. In addition to the shallow wound from the left side to the right side of his abdomen, he found he had a bullet hole through his hat, two through his coat, and three through his pantaloons.

After dispatching an ambulance for Baker, Colonel Brown instructed Captain Elzey to start at daybreak for Fort Drum, with his command and a six pounder. An express rider was sent to Fort Deynaud with orders for Major Arnold to withdraw the small garrison from Fort Center, to warn Lieut. Larned who was repairing the road from Fort Meade, and for Arnold to lead two companies to Fort Drum, join with Elzey, and search for survivors. Three men were sent to Fort McKenzie to warn the small command there.

About three o'clock Saturday morning, Sergeant Holland and Corporal Williams arrived at Fort Myers reporting an uneventful escape. Private Otto Hersch, who had lost his way, returned Saturday afternoon by way of the Fort Deynaud road.

On Saturday morning, Captain Elzey departed for Fort Drum. Colonel Brown sent another dispatch to Major Arnold, advising him to hasten his departure from Fort Deynaud, and to send back some horses, as there were no more available for express riders.

Major Arnold left Fort Deynaud at one-thirty P.M. that day and arrived at Fort Drum on Sunday, December 23rd, and Captain Elzey arrived shortly after. At eight o'clock that evening, Lieutenant Hartsuff made his way to their camp.

While trying to reach the protection of a hammock, Hartsuff had fallen into a lily pond. Too exhausted to rise, he remained there with only his head out of the water. While there he heard an Indian repeatedly cry, "Come out, come out." After about two hours, he managed to walk about two hundred yards towards the road, where he fell among the dwarf palmettos. He stayed there until night, and then moved about half a mile. There he stayed concealed two days, until the evening of Saturday, the 22nd. Suffering from exhaustion, wounds, thirst, and hunger, he alternately walked and rested until sunrise. Finding water, he rested until Sunday afternoon when he resumed his march. The glow of campfires and beating of "tattoo" led him to Arnold's camp.

The Surgeon with Major Arnold's company probed two and one-half inches for the ball in Hartsuff's chest, but was unable to find it. The Surgeon at Fort Myers did not deem it advisable to make further search.

Major Arnold marched on the 25th to the scene of the skirmish and buried the dead. The mules and two horses had been killed and five other horses apparently taken by the Indians. The wagons had been burned. Four men had been killed, four others wounded, and three escaped uninjured.

Hartsuff had realized that the burning of the forts meant that he should exercise caution, but in view of the abandoned villages and the absence of any sign of recent occupation by Indians, he thought it safe to continue his scout as ordered. The expeditions of Rogers and Parkhill during the two succeeding years found that the Indians had moved to the vicinity of the present Collier Seminole State Park, in southwestern Collier County, some fifty miles away from the scene of the skirmish.

The Indian man and boy herding hogs, seen on the third day of the scout, had probably communicated the progress of the scouting party to the other Indians. Bowlegs was an old man and would not likely have led the war party himself. Sergeant Holland reported that he saw a tall Indian that seemed to be a chief. Canova describes a tall Indian named Safajahojee, as being second in command to Bowlegs. When advised that the scouting party was heading southeast into the Big Cypress, Bowlegs no doubt sent Safajahojee with a group of warriors to observe the soldiers. Traveling northeastward from their home to the nearest point on the military trail, Safajahojee and his men found Lieut. Hartsuff's camp. Bowlegs' old banana plants were several miles away to the east and not on the route the Indians would have followed. The attack was most likely prompted by the exuberance of Safajahojee and the desire of the Indians to do something that would impress their own people.

By February 27th, Hartsuff had recovered, and was given the command of a special detachment of thirty mounted men, organized for patrol and escort duty. They were given special equipment, including Colt revolvers and lariats, and were known as the "Mounted Volunteers." They saw action in several skirmishes in the succeeding year's efforts to remove the Seminoles.²¹

Hartsuff's last scout in south Florida was from Fort Myers north to Charlotte Harbor, and back along Peas Creek, in June, 1856. Expecting some

²¹ Ibid. 28 B 1856, and Order No. 6 and No. 8, Headquarters Troops on the Caloosahatchee, Fort Myers, February 27, 1856.

leave, he started northward, on July 11th, in command of a detachment of invalids, who were being transferred to Fort Columbus, New York. He was diverted without leave, to be assigned as Assistant Instructor of Artillery at the Military Academy at West Point. After two years at the Academy and various other assignments, he accompanied the secret mission to defend Fort Pickens, just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

After serving in several major battles during the Civil War, and being wounded again at Antietam, he was assigned to less active duties, serving on advisory boards and in the office of the Adjutant General. He was retired as a Major General in 1871. In May 1874, he was stricken with pneumonia, and died on the 17th at Sturtevant House, New York City, at the age of forty-four. He was buried at West Point. An autopsy revealed the pneumonia infection which caused his death was centered around the wound in his chest received 19 years earlier at the skirmish in the Big Cypress.²²

²² 2557 ACP 1871, see note 4.