



# Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing

In lot 125 of the sunny slopes of Oakwood cemetery, there rests a Santa Cruz gent who was soundly pinched by Abraham Lincoln.

This bony-fingered tweek was administered on the afternoon of April 28, 1864, in the White House—right before the eyes of Mrs. Lincoln.

The victim was Ralph O. "Billy" Bates, who died at 62 in a Soquel sanitarium of typhoid pneumonia in December, 1909.

The story of the pinch started back in June, 1862, when Billy became a private in the Ninth Ohio Cavalry to help put down the Southern Rebels.

By November he was chasing rebels into Virginia and before he could fire a shot in anger a gang of Confederates sprang from behind a boulder one dawn while he was on guard duty, leveled guns at him and one ordered: "Dismount and throw down your gun, you infernal Yankee."

From this moment the long, lanky lad was battered about in temporary prisons until he landed in the notorious Andersonville stockade in Georgia, February, 1863.

In an autobiography called "Billy and Dick," Bates reels off a horror story of foul water, inhuman treatment, disease, slop for food and an appalling death rate.

One time a Southern woman was allowed to distribute religious tracts in the stockade. According to Bates she took offense at a prayer given by a Yankee minister-prisoner and spit in his face. Bates led her to the exit gate for her own protection and when he told the guards the story the woman spit in his face. Bates knocked her flat.

For this he was hung by his thumbs by order of Captain Wirz, a real villain of a prison official. When a fellow prisoner brought him water. Wirz shot him dead. Bates swore weakly that before he died he would see Wirz hang. This won the spunky Yankee two bullets in the thigh and leg. A few days later, Bates and Wirz clashed again, and Bates repeated his oath. Wirz shot him again—this time in the side.

Bates recovered and made plans

for escape. He and his friend Dick spent seven months and eight days digging a tunnel from their dugout, 59 feet to a point outside the prison. They dug only at night, removing the dirt in an old shirt sleeve and throwing it in a nearby creek.

On March 2, 1864, after a year and a month as prisoners, Bates and his friend Dick, and 80 other Yanks, crawled through the cave and out to freedom.

Here followed nearly a month of hiding in swamps and forests by day and walking toward Union-held territory by night. They were hunted by hounds, hidden eight days by a Negro woman, and finally reached friendly hands near Bridgeport, Alabama.

The condition of the two men so shocked Yankee officers they became celebrities. They were brought before General Sherman who decided that their story should be told directly to the president.

Bates and his friend were kept in their filthy, ragged clothes. They hadn't worn shoes for 16 months. So began a strange journey to Washington.

April 28, 1864, the two were ushered into the White House in all their rags and vermin and introduced to President Lincoln. They told their story of rebel cruelty and only then were allowed to be cleaned and clothed.

For 11 days they recuperated at the White House as a guest of the President.

Bates recalled the President as being quite a joker and during the first afternoon at the White House "gave us several pretty severe pinches." It was a Lincoln-esque pun as he put it "just to see if there is a pinch of flesh on either of you."

Bates was sent home, later to be commissioned a second lieutenant. He returned to combat until the war ended.

Before coming to Santa Cruz to settle, Ralph Bates kept an old promise.

He testified at the trial of Captain Wirz and stood in the cold morning air in Washington November 10, 1865, to watch his body swing at the end of a rope.