

# THE DIARY OF 1898

## Spanish American War

By Frank Nickerson, Sgt. USA  
Troop "F", Sixth Cavalry

*Note:* Frank Nickerson, was born on November 10, 1871. He joined the United States Army in 1887 when he was sixteen years old, and worked his way through the ranks. He retired in 1913 as a Captain. He died in February of 1960.

Frank Nickerson was my Great Uncle, my Grandfather's brother, on my Mother's side of the family. As a young boy I knew him as a grand person, and was always fascinated by the stories he would tell. He and my Aunt Myrtle, lived in a big Victorian house, in San Rafael, CA. The lower floor of this three-story house was dedicated to my Uncle, and was completely filled with artifacts that he had collected while in the Army. There were guns and swords, and a million things that would, and did influence me. Most of these things were lost... unfortunately, but we discovered this Diary of 1898, while going through my Aunt Myrtle's estate, in 1989. I am re-writing it exactly as it was written down originally.

April 19, 1898.

Left Ft. Leavenworth with four troops of 6th Cav. and 8 Companies of the 20th Inf. The Cav. for Chicamauga Park, Ga. The Inf. for Mobile. Common coaches - a hungry trip I think.

April 22.

Arrived at Chicamauga Park. Camped near R.R. (Rail Road)

April 23.

Moved to Camp back in Park. Fine camp good water - pig hunting the order of the day - Plenty of drill - Grub poor.

Lt. Cole in command of the Troop - I am in charge of Cook house - Made Sergeant. A lady sends up a cake for Edwards and we all get a bite.

We take a run in Georgia making about 30 miles on horseback. At a walk on the level, when in the bad places in the mountains we get the command Gallop. We are on a sham battle so everyone enjoys the wild riding. Maj. Kerr in command of our ride - we win by gaining a higher point that the enemy must pass. Back to camp after dark. The cook caught with the pork in the oven and I get hell and no pork for supper.

May 11th

Left Chicamauga Park, May 11th for Tampa, Fla. Sleeping cars. Good trip. We marched to a small town near Park where we loaded our horses. As we came south the whites grow few and niggers plenty. Through most of the way there is nothing but Pine timber. There are many sawmills. Gathering pitch is the chief work of the people.

May 12

Our horses are in horse cars. One or two men on top of each car to put out sparks from wood burning engine. Narrow gage R.R. and very slow. Mostly swamp land covered with forest.

May 13th

Arrived at Tampa water scarce sand plenty, soldiers by the thousands, Rucks and new horses. Grub poor.

Good bathing on the beach and we get to swim horses every day. Cuban soldiers camped near here.

May 14

Flies & heat. I am in charge of cook house, took team and gathered palm leaves & made shelter over kitchen - this makes it a fine place. Must stop the troop from loafing in kitchen.

Muller and I start monte game &

win a little.

Later - Rough Riders are camped not far from us. They make plenty of noise, one R.R. dropped about \$100 in monte game this morning.

Gardner & I take a look at Rough R. camp this eve. Shorty knows some of the R.R. by number. (Shorty had been a guard when Leavenworth Prison had been U. S. prison.)

June 8th

Left Tampa. And arrived at Port Tampa. Same date - distance 9 miles all nite on train - no sleep - too crowded.

Sharks eating dead horses near our boat. Men in swimming, sure hot, we wish we would sail - why don't we?

Only half of troops to go on this trip - about 50 to troop. Some picking - old & young stay in U.S. - same in all troops. All anxious to get started. Ships loading nite - & day. (Spanish fleet reported - off Florida coast)

Fantom fleet reported, we put back into bay - we may not sail today. Many Spanish boats - Gun boats said to be outside bay. Very hot on deck - many sharks.

I get to go ashore as horse guard. I have 8 men and about 100 horses. Officers horses not loaded yet & are on picket lines near a camp of nigger recruits.

We had a fine riot, the negro recruits were driven out of the red-light district by U.S. Inf. soldiers, not many hurt badly. But that Inf. Reb sure went into those negros. They never stopped moving forward.

June 14th

Left Pt. Tampa on Steamer Rio-Grand for Cuba. Loaded like cattle.

Very little to eat. The sun is burning hot and there is no shelter from it. Sea good we are now making fast time - 7 knots an hour.

Can see the Battle ship Indiana today - 16th - rough & many seasick, will be glad when we land. Water not good & we are on an allowance - some few men not seasick - hot and

crowded.

I got a brisket from stews & some of the boys pinched a few potatoes & onions from ships galley - some beans from Corp. Lewis - hot soup. But no place to cook until tonite -

Soup was good, first we have had - will try again today. Corp. Lewis took my place in charge of mess - leaving Tampa - strong on saving, poor on food. We give one of soldiers 25¢ to get us a cup of rice - to start our part of soup. Lewis comes through with two cans tomatoes. 1st Sgt. made him - or I don't believe he would give us salt and pepper.

Everyone seasick, no one goes below, can't stand smell - it rains but still on deck & deck crowded.

June 20th

Arrived S.E. coast of Cuba. All anxious to get on shore - can see no sign of life - expect to fight on landing. Can see Morro Castle and several of our War ships.

June 21st

Bombardment. The Navy bombarded a small town and also shelled the shore. Troops are getting ready to land. The town is on fire - Troops are landing. There is a block house on a high hill near the town, but no fire from there yet.

June 22nd

We have received no orders to land, and they may not land all of us here. Landing horses & mules from open sea - they sure swim well. Navy launches pull the ships boats near beach & the waves do the rest.

(impression of a wooden match to mark this next entry)

June 24th

Landed. We landed in small boats today. Were among the last to land. We're all glad to get ashore. There is not much of a town here. There was some machine shops and a

roundhouse. The Spanish burnt these before we landed. Some of the stores have large holes where our Navy shelled them. There are many Cubans here and keep coming out of the hills - few women here now. Coca Nuts and Mango plenty. No tobacco or anything in any of the stores. The Spanish took everything with them and burned what they did not want.

We marched about three miles to a high hill and went in camp.

June 25th

Lt. Cole asked me to hunt up something to boil water in & I sure did a good job by getting a crate of new chambers from the wrecked Spanish Hosp. & find an old Spanish horse that is wounded. But Capt. Stanton of 'C' Troop saw me and took the horse to carry his blanket roll.

Some Troops pass our camp going toward Santiago.

June 26th

Art. escort from our camp to Siboney camped in Coca Nut grove near Cuban Army. Did not reach camp until dark. Camp damp and wood hard to find.

I am last man to get to camp, as was rear guard to Art. & they find trail bad - so here to stay.

Land crabs everywhere. They can move backward, forward, and sideways & never turn around to move - and fast. Eyes out on wires. They are many & shells striking together sound like bones in the doctor's office.

We here of a fight between 10th Cav & Spanish, the R.R. (Rough Riders) almost getting caught & reports say many killed - but not how many. We expect to go forward tonight & get some rations, Green coffee again - that means no coffee for we can't seem to roast it in our tin cups. Hard bread & water, no good, and some of men show it. Lt. Cole is sick, but still able to keep up. Rains - and dog tents all leak, several sick, eating coca nuts & green mangos.

June 27th

Regiment came up - we broke camp and marched about 8 miles. Went into camp near good water. Remained in camp until June 30th. We are near the City of Santiago - can see part of City. Coca Nuts about 2 miles - Mangos near. It rains nearly every day.

The Weary Walkers Hdqrs are near, larger tents & more of them than Gen Hdqrs. War correspondents camp there & painters drawing some of the men. 1st Cav Vol. & some wounded from fight near hear. The R.R. or walkers are brigaded with us - they have a hard time walking as some have cowboy boots, too tight - & high heels. They are the only Reg. that have the new uniforms "Kaki" - & the only Vol. Reg. armed with Krag carbines.

June 30th

Broke camp marched until 2:30 that night - camped in a swamp. Oh what a night - glad to lay down in the mud and water and get what little sleep we could.

July 1st

Cuban Army passes as we are cooking or trying to cook breakfast in the trail. Some mounted, & good. By breakfast we start to move - but trail loaded & we stand still most of time.

At daylight we are at a creek or river, Art. on our left, balloon overhead, some firing. A fight to our right - Art. & volley firing.

(What appears to be a neatly written version of the previous entry)

July 1st 1898

Men up at 4:50 cooking breakfast. Cuban Army passed us. We again took up our bed and walked. Battery opened up on the Spanish, and we advanced about a mile to a stream where we left our packs and formed a line of battle. We lay in thick bushes and vines. The sun gets hotter as the day grows, and so does the Spanish



fire. We are not firing as we can see nothing. About 9 o'clock we start forward - the vines make it hard to get through. All is still - we can hardly see each other, and the Spanish fire is very hot. Someone is firing in our rear. We are between two fires. I sent Ray to rear to stop whoever it was firing into us. The firing in our rear stops and we keep moving forward. Ray did not come back. We pass some of the Troops (wrote Rough Riders and crossed it out) - they cheer us. The Spanish answer the cheers with volleys and grape. Muller is hit in hand, but still in line. We cross a stream waist deep - through a wire fence and up a hill. Men falling everywhere. The Spanish give up the hill and retreat across to another larger one. We move on, the Gatling Guns come up, and the second hill is taken - the Inf. getting in some fine work on our left flank. We form on second hill and keep up a steady fire - until night stops the fight. Dead and wounded lay everywhere - Spanish and American Soldiers dead side by side. We try to get something to eat, but go to digging trenches and burying the dead. No Sleep no eat. Get ready for a big fight tomorrow.

We dig all night - no lights. Troops moving to our right and left. A Battery comes up and takes place just behind our trenches.

1st Sgt Oliver is in charge of Troop. Lt. Cole to hosp. wherever that is. Col. Carrol, Capt. Kerr - our Reg., Cpt. Lewis, Trumpeter Arnold, Muller, Wrights - Wray - "F" Troop, wounded. Muller hit in two places - not bad, leg and arm. Muller, Wray, Lewis from my section. Lewis & Muller still on firing line.

A heavy fire just before dark & Johnson my section hit over heart - bad - fighting stops at dark. Major Lebo 6th wounded. I hunt up the Dr. for Johnson. Dr. says no use.

July 2nd

Fight started again at daylight - lasted all day. Fighting all day was

not enough so got up and had a round that night. At the first streak of dawn the Spanish opened the ball by firing volleys at our Art., and the sharpshooters took a hand trying to pick off our gunners. We are in the trenches firing back now and then. The Battery takes a hand and the fighting becomes general around our whole line. Shells, bullets, dirt fly over our heads as we lay in the shallow trenches - firing when we can. The canonading is deafening - some men are getting hit in the trenches. Our Battery moves to the rear - cannot stand the Spanish sharpshooters who are picking off their gunners. We fight all day. Start to dig our trenches deeper at night when the fight starts again. Does not last long. The 71st N.Y. loose two men we get a few hit.

All day heavy shells from Spanish Navy have been going over. Sound like freight trains.

I got some bacon and sugar from Art. haversacks - big feed for three of us.

July 3rd

Fighting all forenoon. Flag of truce raised at 12 o'clock. We keep the good work up - the Spanish answer, and the ball opens. The Spanish slack their fire. We keep up a slow fire until noon.

Sampson destroyed fleet 8:50 in the morning. We are all glad to hear Sampson shooting a few of his guns. We get something to eat and drink - lay around under the trees waiting for next move and wondering how the white flag will come out. We expect Navy to come into bay now. Some heavy firing inside. I had a chill today, not so good. Muller and I are bunking together & his hand pains him, looks bad. Lewis is coming on O.K. This his third wound, The Indians gave him two others years ago. We all forgive him for being a poor mess N.C.O. Shorty Gardner nearly got his by sticking his head up in place of using the peep-hole. Some Spanish shells don't burst no good.

We hear Johnson died - he was hit bad. No sound from him - even when being carried off hill. Muller & Lewis O.K. now.

July 4th

Taking our turn in the trenches - one hour in and four out - we spend the 4th of July. The flag is still up and we are getting tired of it.

Better start fighting & finish our job while we are able - as many are now sick & others too weak to charge Santiago & I guess we are expected to do that before we finish.

Monte game in trenches. Howell trying to get paper for silver, no one wants silver - too heavy.

Much talk & mistakes pointed out. - Who was in Command Shafter & Wheeler sick. Sumner in command now & always on hand. Saw him above our trenches night of 2nd - wonder he did not get hit.

Why did not Spanish take small guns from battleships and use them on this hill. We would never have taken hill if they had.

Our Gattling Guns burned out first hour of fighting. Someone did not know their job.

The Dijmincts (?) gun - wonder of the ages - no good or no ammunition or both - fired a few shots only.

We had very little Art. & what we had could not help much.

Paper from the U.S. telling of fight 1st July. No one in fight but 71st New York & Rough Riders. - (Woods Weary Walkers) they have all the war correspondents & future painters & larger camp than General Hdqrs. We don't think much of these intellectuals.

July 6 - 98

Prisoners exchanged. Lt. Nobson and seven sailors exchanged at 2:40. Great cheering as they came through our lines.

White flags on almost every building in Santiago - also red cross flags.

Trenches fortified at night with sacks of dirt - we expect bombardment

tomorrow. Talk of us going into Santiago tomorrow, many will not get into city. But most of us will. Can see plenty of barbed wire & trenches between us and city & they put up more every night. No rations & little ammunition.

Some men getting stung by seapins - Lewis gets everything that comes along. Was stung on foot last night & kicked tent down.

Double shelter tents not so bad - have limb proofs, but no one uses them. A few shells from Spanish fort not bad & if we had more ammunition would feel safe.

Muller gets some real coffee? Nothing to do but wait for the rain, 3 pm daily, then inside shelter tent & wait for the chills if it's your day - about every other day. Each of us has a chill followed by fever. No quinine in camp or not enough to go around.

July 7th

Women and children leave Santiago for San Juan. Will we charge city or not? Some bombardment waiting - no one knows what for. A few rations came up last night. Only a few. Troop gets one #10 can tomatoes. I win the can for my section & we will soon feed. Pack trains of about 50 mules bring ammunition & drop it on firing line. Plenty Spanish ammunition, Mauser & Remington in Spanish trenches - also plenty of Spanish arms. Vols want to use Spanish Mausers - hundreds of Spanish arms stacked & rusting in rain. We use bacon grease for our carbines. Plenty of bacon & hard bread now - also coffee. We feel better & wish they would move forward. Why do we wait?

Spanish build new wire every night. We can hear them working. No firing at night.

We hear there is plenty of rations at Sibarey but no roads - only pack mules can get through. The Vols get boxes of food from U.S. They take good care of Vols, Regulars are expected to look after themselves.

July 10th

Battle started 4:00 o'clock. Art. doing most of the fighting - stopping at dark. We have been expecting a big bombardment, by our siege guns, when they get up from Sibarey. If they are all up, there are few of them or no ammunition.

Our bombardment weak - Spanish did not get hurt much if any. When will we take city by storm & then to Havana? Will we march over island to Havana or what? Not many able to march far.

In front of us are large Mango trees - four hundred yds. Mc Comb - Sgt. in "B" & I have a time shooting at flashes from these trees. We have a pair of field glasses & today spotted some Spanish soldiers on a road back of Spanish trenches - 1000 yds. We could raise dust near them. I don't believe we hit one.

Shorty Gardner had outpost & a wet night. We can hear the Spanish working on trenches and wire every night, & can see new works each morning. When we take the city by storm now, we expect many will be killed on our side of the wire, once through wire we will be a match for the Dons. Some talk of some of us using the Mauser & bayonet if we are to storm city. Carbines & no bayonet, & revolvers is what we took this hill with, but there were few Spanish & little wire. Now we can see several lines of wire between this hill & city.

The Vols are getting food from Red Cross - we get little, but no one seems to expect much. Shorty says the Vol. just take anything & everything they see & can carry away. They took a train in Tampa & a boat at Port Tampa. Wounded horses or mules turned loose to graze & get well - the Vol. pick them up & use them to carry rations from Red Cross at Sibarey. The rapid fire cannon & Gattlings are with the Vol. Cav and all war correspondents.

T.M (Tom Muller?) left some of pack team in pasture for night & rest. Gone! Any Regular would be hung for

any of the above stealing.

The Col. of Vol. Cav. got in command of Division for short time & I guess he ordered some of dirty work that is going on. We don't expect much, but some men are kicking, as they see food going to others. Share & share alike is the only way we can see it here.

July 11th

Firing until 11 A.M. Flag of Truce puts stop to battle.

Talk in newspapers of charge of R.R - there was no charge & not more than fifty men of R.R in 1st line to reach this hill. The 9th & 6th & 3rd were on Kettle Hill when R.R. came up.

On picket in the rain - oh what a rain - of all the rains I ever saw.

Many sick, no hospital - no doctors, no medicine, the only thing we don't need is rain. If we don't take Santiago soon - this Army won't take it. 1st Sgt. Oliver now has a time finding men well enough for outpost duty.

Many could not walk into Santiago. My section gets along fine & seem to get our share of the work. Most of us can take it. Lewis, Shorty, Muller & I are still strong - when not down with fever. We carry water from river in bamboo, we are expected to boil this water. Some do and fill canteens for next day.

July 13th

Gen. Miles and Shafter visit Spanish lines from 11:30 - 12:30. We watch our flag - a bed sheet on a long pole carried by color bearers - All expected Spanish would open fire on our Generals. No firing - & the flag returns to our trenches.

July 14th

Spanish surrender about 10:15 in the morning.

July 17th

On guard over Spanish prisoners. They are very hungry AND very polite. They go into camp in front of our trenches, they had wine & some are lit-up & talk loud & much. We



can't understand them - just as well. The prisoners get rations. We don't, many of us are sick & could not eat anyway. & all are glad we do not have to charge over that bunch of barbed wire. Everyone anxious to go into Santiago. No one allowed to leave camp.

We expect rations by way of Santiago today or tomorrow. Vol. roaming all over - Regulars must stay in camp.

July 18 - 98

Moved camp four miles further into the interior. Men sick on the road - terrible heat. I did not reach camp until dark. Camp damp wood scarce. We passed through Caynay - a miserable town. We passed the Spanish women, children, old men - and cripples. Also Cubans going back to their homes in Santiago. They were starving. Many fell sick and dying along the road as we passed. Soldiers of our Army gave them hardtack - and went hungry themselves. Mothers begging for hardtack to feed their baby's - children crying for food - barefoot - without clothing to cover them. A dirty hungry crowd - too weak to travel far in the hot sun - going only from tree to tree - dropping in the shade - some to march again, but some to die. Old women too weak to walk. Children trying to help them. Nothing to eat when they reach Santiago - if they do reach it. Not a chicken, sheep, dog or cat to be seen in this part of Cuba. No stores - no gardens - green Mangos or starve. We know what green Mangos do to us - and can't see how these children live.

July 22 - 98

First issue of fresh beef since June 7th. Some fresh meat tonight - if it is fresh - has been in launch to Santiago & by wagon to camp without ice.

Hardbread, tomatoes. Good hardbread - best feed in month. But, too late - as many can't hold their food.

Several sick last night - Ju Bug

very bad.

We still have our pup tents & our daily rains.

Our hospital is the shade of a large mango tree - the band, 6th Cav. band are nurses. Anyone that can - helps the sick. Four doctors.

July 23rd

Sibley tents up today for the first time in Cuba. Some doctors tents came up today. Teamsters say that Santiago is very bad - many dying there.

July 24th

Fresh bread for the first time. Troop cooking together - living good, as far as eating - many sick. Sick with diarrhea.

July 30th - 98

Death of one of our Troop. Joe Burgh died of fever. Was buried at 12:30 North of hospital.

Aug. 6th

Left camp for Santiago. Marched my own way - two miles to railroad - took boxcars, and were soon at the city - where we took tug to Steamer Gate City in the harbor. Sick with dysentery.

Aug. 7th

Lying in harbor in sight of Santiago. Was paid at 2:30 and pulled for America at 5. Passing out through the harbor saw all Spanish forts - the Merrimae & Reina Mercedes. All the forts badly torn from shells fired by our ships. Sick with dysentery.

Aug. 13th - 98

Arrived in sight of Long Island. Dropped anchor opposite Montauk Point at 3:30 P.M. Was boarded by inspecting officer. Can see our camps on shore very plainly. Very sick with dysentery.

Aug. 14th

Stood examination at 7:00 and prepared to land at 9:00 o'clock. Landed and marched to quarantine

camp 1 mile. A fine camp - all glad to tread American soil. I am sick with chills and fever - Dysentery & cramps.

Aug 26th

Have been sick for some time - am in General Hospital now - am gaining fast - expect to be well soon. Am thinking of trying to get a furlow.

This is a large hospital - the Red Cross is doing everything for us and many leave everyday to take furlow

for their homes. Many are dying. Two have died from this ward today. Do not know their names. I am in ward J. I often wonder if the "J" stands for Jones.

Aug. 31st 1898

Left hospital with high fever bound for home for 30 days. Hard time getting off.

Landed in L.I. City at night. (Long Island City) Went to Red Cross hospital - stayed all night - fever 106°.



# AFTERWORD

Frank Nickerson finally returned to his home town of Whitewater Wisconsin several days later - via New York City, and Chicago by rail. There he was nursed back to health, by his mother (my Great Grandmother) - a Civil War widow. He wrote other entries into the diary, which is 3 1/2" by 6" and leather bound, describing his daily recovery from dysentery and malaria.

He returned back to active duty, after this furlough, and went on to the Philippines, where he was commissioned an officer. He served the rest of his active career in the Army there, and went through other harrowing battles during the Filipino Insurrection.

The Diary of 1898, was interesting to me - for I would remember some of the things he told me, as a young boy...years later. When, as a Marine fighting a war in a hostile, foreign country - I too would suffer the hardships of heat, poor food and water, and the diseases of the tropics. And this only sixty-eight years after the Diary of 1898 had been written. And, it was through this experience, that I admire the dedication of a person like my Uncle - in having kept a diary through what must have been adverse hardships physical, mental, and environmental.

All warriors will attest: - There is no such thing as perfect battle field conditions. They have been known to grumble and gripe - while performing their duty through incredible hardships, and performing that duty well. For some - it is the last that they do...

My Uncle's heart-wrenching observations of the civilian plight, after the truce - I find haunting. For, they are the ones who always seem to suffer most, while being blown about, like dust on the winds of war... Long after the warrior has exited... Or perished... from the battle field.

As for glory... My Uncle's final entry into the diary - was a newspaper clipping. When I first read the diary I found it between the July 14th and July 17th entries - no origin or date.

*John F. Harris Former Sergeant USMC - April 19, 1994*

## Markers Tell Truth About San Juan Hill Battle

San Marino, Calif. - To this very day there persists a fantastic tale believed by nearly everybody (Vox poppers, too!) that the Rough Riders under Colonel Theodore Roosevelt fought and won the Battle of San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War, whereas said battle was fought, and said hill was won by forces of the Regular Army

How do we know this?

Well, we were in the battle (1898) to make Colonel Roosevelt the Governor of New York, speaking to audiences nightly in the big city, speaking often with the Colonel. But one night we were at Carnegie Hall with General Stewart L. Woodford, recently returned from his ambassadorial duties at the Court of Spain.

In the course of our address we took the Rough Riders, led by Colonel Roosevelt, up San Juan Hill, cutting their way through barbed-wire barricades, scores falling to rise no more, and finally planting Old Glory in triumph on top.

We received a great hand from the audience, and felt pretty fit until a chap in a Rough Rider uniform approached, held out his hand, and said: "That was a great speech, and a fine description of the Battle of San Juan Hill - but we were not

there; we did not fight that battle. The Regulars did."

Puzzled and perplexed, we asked: "Where were the Rough Riders?"

He replied: "We were at Kettle Hill."

Later in the evening, dining with General Woodford and his daughter at the Waldorf, we asked him what he thought about it, and he replied, "I always supposed the Rough Riders fought that battle, but the lad seemed to know what he was talking about."

Still unconvinced, the next year we visited Cuba, and looked for and found the famous hill, a mere pimple on the face of the landscape, difficult to find. And there we fully confirmed the statement of the lad at Carnegie Hall. Tablets and markers everywhere telling of the regiments, companies, and detachments of the Regular Army that were there that day, but nowhere was there a tablet or marker showing the presence of a Rough Rider, for he was not there.

It is time the school histories were revised so as to tell the truth and cease peddling bunk to deceive the gullible. - *Frank Collins.*