

## **AN ABANDONED TRUNK FOUND IN A WOBURN ATTIC REVEALS A CIVIL WAR DIARY**

**by Marie Coady**

**Attics are full of treasures. Most contain family memorabilia not valuable to anyone but family. Yet each item is treasured, not for its monetary value, but because it evokes the memory of a particular family member or event. Sometimes a family treasure is discovered to be a valuable work of art or tells the family's history at a glance, but even then the family is loath to part with them.**

**In the attic of a house on Burlington Street in Woburn one such treasure sat for many, many years unexplored. Not because the mysterious trunk didn't tug at the curiosity of the home's owners, but because it was left behind by a former occupant for safe keeping, and the family believed that at any moment someone would appear at their door to claim the locked and dusty container.**

**The owner of the trunk, Jessica Gazet, had been hired as a nurse to care for a man named John Butler who lived at 28 Burlington Street in Woburn. When he died around 1930, Jessica Gazet, asked Mr. Butler' son-in-law, Clement Best, who lived in the house just behind the Butlers, to store the trunk for her until she was settled elsewhere. Eventually, the Bests passed away and the trunk came into the possession of Nancy and James Catania when they inherited Nancy's father's house. But Jessica Gazet had still not returned to collect her trunk.**

**After the mysterious trunk sat undisturbed for more than thirty years, the Catania's thought it time to explore its contents and unseal its secrets. So they dragged the trunk down the stairs and set it on the living room floor. When it was unlocked, the story of a Union soldier, who served his country from the opening guns of the Civil War until he fell mortally wounded in battle, began to unfold.**

**That was in 1960, when James Catania Jr., the Catania's son, was still very young. But Jim Jr. was totally taken with the story of Private Edward Gazet, and through the years his curiosity about the forgotten soldier grew until it became an obsession. As a result, Jim has spent the last ten years researching and transcribing Private Gazet's journals, letters, photos, drawings, poems, and artifacts and piecing together his story into a manuscript entitled, If It Be My Fate To Fall.**

**Edward K. Gazet was barely eighteen when he came to Boston in 1857 from his country home in Newcastle, Maine, seeking excitement and adventure. What he found instead was scant employment at the meanest of tasks and little money to join in the excitement that surrounded him in Boston.**

**What Gazet's Boston Journal, kept faithfully from January 1, 1861 to April 18, 1861, reveals is the character of young man who is wracked by guilt at not being able to pay his board, and who spurned the party life in search of enduring relationships and meaningful experiences. Ed Gazet reveals himself as a man of principle, and as you read the sometimes short and cryptic notes he left behind, you can't help developing an attachment for him.**

**Ed Gazet's Boston Journal ends on April 18, 1861, the day he signed on for duty with the 11th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, and only a few days after Gen. Beauregard gave the order for his Confederate troops to open fire on Fort Sumter and signal the beginning of Civil War.**

**Gazet's first letter home to his mother on June 12, 1861, once again begins to chronicle his life. It is written while he is stationed at Fort Warren on Georges Island in Boston Harbor and describes life at the Fort.**

**"I am writing this from the ramparts of the fort seated on a block of granite, the drummers are beating, soldiers running to and fro, and ladies who have come to see their sons, brothers, lovers and friends" just as his sister, Elmira had come to visit him earlier that week. He describes the men of his regiment as being made up of the "roughest crowd in Boston", but claims that as they come to know one another the quarrels become less frequent and less serious. He claims to "like the life" and is anxious "to cross bayonets with the foe". On a more serious note, he tells his mother that "if I fall you can draw" on the \$100 he will be paid for enlisting.**

**A July 3, 1861, his letter to his sister, Elmira, finds Gazet in Washington, DC encamped behind the White House. He describes how the Regiment was greeted everywhere with cheers and flowers. But the highlight of the experience was "when we marched in front of the White House where old Abe reviewed us as we passed".**

**It wasn't long before his letters turned to the grim realities of war. Gazet's letter, dated July 23, 1861, was written only two days after his "brigade marched from our encampment at Bull Run" in Virginia. It was there, at Manassas, on a Sunday at 2 p.m. on July 21, 1861, Ed Gazet first experienced battle. But his dreams of victory were dashed when, "We went into the field, flushed with hope and pride and came off a broken, routed hoard. The enemy was strongly fortified . . . our troops charged gallantly . . . but were driven back with fearful loss . . .".**

**It was at this point that Gazet was separated from his regiment and "fought on his own hook" until he could make his way back to camp. But not before running a barrage of cannon and musket fire after being trapped between "Union Zouaves and Confederate forces". Almost 70,000 men were engaged in the battle of Manassas which resulted a Confederate victory and 4,700 casualties.**

**Gazet was lucky that day, but his luck ran out little more than a year after he enlisted on April 18, 1861. His last journal entry appears on Friday, May 2, 1862, when he describes being “shelled out” from a fatigue (work) party and making his way back to camp at Yorktown, VA, to find two letters from home.**

**On May 15, 1862, a letter was sent to Robert Fuller, the husband of his sister Elmira, informing the family of Gazet’s death. The letter reads:**

**“It has become my sad duty to inform you of the death of E. K. Gazet, which took place at 9:30 this A.M.. He was shot through the thigh, the wound was of so serious a nature that little hopes of his recovery were entertained. The remains will be buried at the cemetery here”**

**The 112 page manuscript, “If It Be My Fate to Fall”, James Catania Jr., has so painstakingly compiled sews together the threads of a young man’s life and untimely death. It took Catania 10 years to decipher the ragged and sometimes illegible letters and journal entries, but he persisted. He persisted because each time he deciphered one of those letter or journal entries, he developed an attachment for Ed Gazet. His ultimate goal was to ensure that Private Ed Gazet’s story was not lost forever, and he has more than accomplished that goal.**

**The most remarkable coincidence about Ed Gazet’s story is that his journals and letters should fall in the hands of Jim Catania Jr. Jim is not only a Civil War buff but participates in Civil War encampments and reenactments. He also is in the business of crafting Union and Confederate toy soldiers, out of wood that are much in demand among Civil and Revolutionary War buffs. But his shining achievement by far is rescuing the story of an ordinary young man of extraordinary character from obscurity.**

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