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Gentry Liked Snake Steaks—But Skip the Rice

Harrodsburg Man Recounts Jap Camp Life

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Harrodsburg, Ky., March 17.—
If there is one thing Capt. William Gentry doesn't ever want any more of it is rice.

He made that quite clear last night as he sat with his family around a wood fire in the spacious living room of Aspel Hall in Harrodsburg, the century-old white-pillared mansion of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. James T. Gentry, and recounted his experiences in the Philippines during the three years he was a Jap prisoner.

Actually, Captain Gentry said, he believes his stomach shrank during his captivity, implying that was because of lack of food. Since he landed in San Francisco March 8 en route home he has been confronted constantly with what he calls "rich food." He wants to eat hearty meals, but complains his stomach has become so small he can eat only small amounts at a time.

Hams Get Good 'Testing.'
In the pantry of the mansion were old white-speckled Kentucky hams and all the good things that go with them, and Captain Gentry tried out some of them yesterday, but last night he returned hero of Bataan and the "March of Death" told his family of another world.

He told of menus of python steaks, roast monkey, hooded cobras—and rice. He told of days of sweating anxiety and nights of blood-letting insects.

The place he talked about most was a 3,000-acre farm on Mindanao Island where the prewar Philippine Government conducted agricultural experiments. The Japs converted it to military camp No. 2, and Captain Gentry and hundreds of other prisoners were taken there October 27, 1942, from Camp Cabanatuan. Captain Gentry was the American in charge at the Mindanao camp.

Python Steaks Were Good.

"Two-thirds of the men thought about food two-thirds of the time," he said. "No sooner than we would finish one meal we would start worrying about where the next one was coming from."

The Yanks got their first taste of primitive eating before Bataan fell, for there they slaughtered and ate their pack mules and cavalry horses. But the diet was more varied on Mindanao. The men grew adept as natives at catching them as the reptiles lay asleep after a gorge of food. A 16-foot python would provide enough white-meat steaks for



C.-J. Photo by Reister.

HOME AGAIN. Capt. William Gentry, for nearly three years a prisoner of the Japanese in the Philippines, is welcomed by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. James T. Gentry.

about a dozen men. And, believe it or not, the steaks were good, Captain Gentry said.

Cobra Steaks Were Better.

But the delicacy was cobra steaks. It was not unusual for the men to catch 15 to 20 a day in the rice fields. The Japs, however, liked cobra so well they would confiscate a day's bag every time they got the opportunity.

"Every time a cobra stuck his head up in the rice field," Captain Gentry said, "eight to 10 men would pounce on it before you knew what was happening. We caught them bare-handed, knowing we had no antidote and that one bite meant sure death. But you must remember the boys were tough, as well as hungry. They were not afraid of anything."

Monkey Meat Rated Poor.

"I'll never forget one afternoon I saw a crowd outside of the building in camp. A cobra was in the middle of the crowd. A soldier named Bill said: 'Watch me, boys, I'm good.' He passed at the cobra with one hand, and grabbed it around the hood with the other hand. The secret in catching them bare-handed is to move faster than the cobra can strike. I never saw or heard of a man dying from cobra bite."

Another delicacy was steaks from the giant lizards that infest Mindanao. The meat tastes so much like chicken it is hard to tell the difference, he said. Not so good, however, was roast monkey.

Gentry Gets Dubious Honor.

"The boys caught a tough monkey one day," Captain Gentry recalled. "They boiled him 24 hours, then roasted him 12 hours. With considerable ceremony they brought the roast to me on a platter."

"Lieutenant," one of them

said, 'we have roasted a monkey for you. Do us the honor of taking the first helping.'

"I knew perfectly well they wanted to test it out on me, because it was the first old monkey we had tried to cook. But I kept a straight face. I tore off a leg and bit out a chunk of meat. I chewed it 30 minutes and finally swallowed it. When the boys saw it didn't hurt me they cut the meat into bits small enough to swallow without chewing, and went ahead and ate it."

Quail Caught Bare-Handed.

There was even more variety to the food on Mindanao. The Japs issued unpolished rice and dried fish that smelled up to 100 yards. Captain Gentry made a trap and caught hundreds of green and white parrots. These birds, he said, tasted a lot like pigeons. Then there was a species of small quail. The boys, of course, had no guns, but they learned to flush a covey and grab them with their bare hands as the birds fluttered up.

Someone asked Captain Gentry if the quail didn't turn out to be the most delightful item on their menu.

"Oh, no," he replied. "It was all good."

Bones Doles Out for Meat.

The Japs often slaughtered a beef, cut all the meat off the bones, then weighed the bones to their prisoners as a full-weight issue of meat.

But the boys had sweets. Captain Gentry devised a sugar mill, consisting of a press and several old kettles. It took about six hours to stir off a supply of syrup or sugar. The Japs caught on and began to store the sweets in their

own workhouse, but Captain Gentry reduced his sugar detail just enough men to produce enough for the Americans and their Jap sentries.

"We were determined," he said, "to produce nothing that could be used by the Jap army."

Japs Kept Small Shoes.

Clothes were a particular problem. Captain Gentry made needles out of tempered wire. He made his own tools and sharpening one end and drilling an eye in the other end. For thread, they either spun native fibers or unraveled a piece of old cloth. Clothes were prolonged with patch on patch, until a man's entire garment might become a series of patches.

The Japs, of course, kept for themselves all the small sizes of shoes sent through by the Red Cross. But the boys soon learned to remodel the big sizes to their own footmarks on a piece of paper. They cut the legs off trousers to make a pair of shorts, then used two legs to make another pair of shorts.

Red Ant Army Won Out.

Captain Gentry made razors out of the 1918 issue of mess kit knives, tempered chisels out of such iron scraps he could find, made pipes for every man who brought him a suitable piece of Philippine mahogany, and learned to do as many things with bamboo as the Filipino natives.

Nights were a nightmare of insects, Captain Gentry said. He saw man after man grow anemic from loss of blood to night-crawling vermin.

"We considered it lucky to find a place with the combination of lice, bedbugs and red ants," Captain Gentry said. "The bedbugs ate the lice, the red ants ate the bedbugs, and all we had left to fight were the red ants. They are so small you can hardly see them, but if one gets on your foot you think a red hot coal has hit you."

Tobacco Saved His Teeth.

When Captain Gentry was transferred to the farm on Mindanao his normal weight of 210 pounds had dropped to 138.

"I was so thin," he said, "I could wash my shirt without taking it off, using my ribs for a washboard."

But life on Mindanao agreed with him, and Captain Gentry is now up to 186 pounds. A small gap between two front teeth is the only visible mark he bears from the ordeal. The gap was caused when his teeth got loose from an attack of surly, but he cured his ailment and tightened his teeth by eating native tobacco for a week.

Rationing Surprises Him.

Incidentally, the boys on Mindanao never suffered for want of tobacco. The native weed is good cigar tobacco, and the Yanks

quickly learned to roll cigars of superior quality.

"Give me your specifications as to color and size," Captain Gentry said, "and I can roll you as good cigars as you can buy."

Two things impressed Captain Gentry most upon returning to America. He was startled to learn that everything is rationed, and he was astonished to see so few civilians his own age. In all of Harrodsburg, he has seen only two boys who were there when he left.

Other Experiences 'Compressed'

One of the things he wanted to do upon returning was to drive a good automobile again. Consequently, he borrowed a friend's car in San Francisco.

"Believe me," he said, "inside of two minutes I was in the middle of San Francisco traffic."

Needless to say, when the Gentry car rolls now, Billy is under the wheel.

Captain Gentry related so many other interesting experiences there is not enough space to recount them. But perhaps some of them can be compressed, as follows:

Natives in the Philippines worship General MacArthur as a god. His soldiers call him Mac in private conversations. They respect him as a low-casualty general who gains objectives with minimum losses.

Japs Are Hogs and Dogs.

The Jap soldier is trained like a dog. He executes his training in battle like a dog going through his tricks. The Jap civilian is like a hog. He does not think like we do, and he is hard to understand except if you think of him as a hog.

The Jap sergeant is the kingpin of the Jap Army. He has power of life and death over his men. He can behead his men at will, and the soldiers, like dogs, are trained to submit to this type of execution as a part of military routine.

The only chance a Jap soldier has to live in battle is to go forward. Ahead of him lies a slim chance, while behind him lies no chance at all, for his sergeant will behead him if he retreats.

Underground Provided News.

The Filipino Underground slipped American prisoners all the news they had of the outside world. The news was fairly accurate and rarely more than a week old.

Internal news travels fast among the natives, who beat on drums and rap on bamboo to produce a weird code not susceptible of understanding by the white man.

And finally, Captain Gentry believes he could live anywhere in the world if you let him start with as much as a gallon bucket. But he never again will be able to look a dish of rice in the face,

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