

ISCHUA VALLEY

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LAST KNOWN SURVIVOR AT LINCOLN'S DEATHBED

In a pretty hillside farmhouse, two or three miles west of Aurora, Indiana, in a hale old age – only slightly crippled occasionally with rheumatism – lives Capt. O.C. Gatch, an army pensioner, who is probably the last person surviving who was present at the deathbed of President Lincoln. Capt. Gatch was at the Battle of Chickamauga where he was captured and taken to Libby Prison at Richmond. After seven months imprisonment he was removed to Danville, Va., then to Macon Ga., on to Columbia, S.C. and finally to Charlotte N.C. where in the early spring of 1865 he escaped. He crossed the country on foot to Knoxville, Tenn., where General Stoneman, in command there, furnished him transportation to Washington, by way of Milford, Ohio.

At Milford, he found his brother, Dr. Charles Gatch, who had meanwhile served as a surgeon in Rosecrans's division of Sheridan's army, but had retired and returned to Ohio. In a few days Capt. Gatch, accompanied by his brother, starting for Washington. He reached the capital on the morning of April 14th, 1865, so sadly memorable in American history.

Together the brothers stopped at one of the smaller hotels. After looking about the city which was new to them, they concluded to attend Ford's Theater where Laura Keane was to play that evening in Boucicault's humorous comedy, "Our American Cousin."

They went early, securing seats in the dress circle only a few feet from the doors of the private box assigned to the president. They had not been there long when President Lincoln and his party, including his wife, a Miss Harris and Maj. Rathbone came in and were received with warm and enthusiastic cheers.

The play began and the young soldier, with his brother, enjoyed its humor immensely. Presently, he heard the report of a pistol. There was an outcry and a struggle in the president's box. Then suddenly Capt. Gatch and his brother saw a man spring from the front of the box, his foot becoming slightly entangled in an American flag, landed down upon the stage, 14 feet below. He fell on his left side, but recovering himself in a moment, ran to the central door behind the stage.

"Excited crowds during those war times were familiar sight," said Capt. Gatch, "but I never witnessed such a scene as was now presented." Nobody, for a time, knew really what happened. Access to the box was guarded by a soldier. He recognized me as a Union soldier. He came to me and said the president had been shot. He requested me to come into the box where my help might be required.

Accompanying him, I found the president lying back with his head across the top of his chair, his coat, waistcoat and shirt bosom opened by Major Rathbone, apparently looking for his wound.

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Major Rathbone asked me if I knew of a physician or surgeon near at hand. I told him my brother was with me and was an excellent physician and army surgeon. "Bring him in, then," he said. I then at once went and brought my brother who had remained waiting for me.

He intimated quietly to Major Rathbone that the president was in effect killed and suggested that the dying man should be removed from the theater. Arrangements were immediately made to receive him at the house of a family named Smith who lived just opposite. Major Rathbone, the guard, my brother and I then lifted and carried him down through the front entrance to the theater and into and across the street, where he was placed upon the bed prepared for him.

Dr. Barnes, the president's physician, had meanwhile been summoned and was soon there. My brother and I remained at the president's bedside or in the room all night until he died.

Taken from THE CATTARAUGUS PRESS, in Delevan, New York on November 22, 1907.

Submitted by William Watkins, Machias Deputy Town Historian