

## TAKE YOUR BEST SHOT

By Jackie Vivelo

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WILLIS STRUM WAS SHOT during a brief skirmish on March 12, 1864. With a dozen other Confederates, Willis had been caught by a small band of Union soldiers. He had been hit twice and left for dead on the brown, wet leaves under an oak. For a little while, even Willis wasn't sure whether he was dead or alive.

After a bit, he opened his eyes and saw sunlight playing through oak leaves. He had done nothing more than think about moving and test a muscle or two before he knew he couldn't go anywhere without help. He was weak from shock and loss of blood and he'd also had a bone broken by a musketball. But Willis was just nineteen and not so worn down by sickness and short rations as most of the Southern troops were in that spring of '64. He'd be all right if help came soon enough.

He dozed for a time. When he opened his eyes, the sun was directly overhead. Light caught a single drop of water ready to fall from the point of a leaf and, to Willis's eyes, transformed the drop into a small marble globe that burned with an inner life.

"It's my shooter!" Willis cried, and he wasn't referring to his gun.

The light of the sun directly above him seemed to spread into a rainbow-colored circle and then to break into a hundred different colored dots.

March was usually the time for their first marble games of the year, played in a ten-foot circle on a dry patch of Virginia earth. Instead of fading in the sunlight, the sight of that circle was becoming sharper for Willis. He and Bucky Webber had put their best marbles into the ring, thirteen marbles, mibs and hoodles they called them.

"Bucky'll win," somebody said.

Willis was good too, but somehow everybody always favored Bucky.

The two of them knelt at the pitch line, a line drawn outside the big circle with its center touching the circle, and lagged for the right to shoot first. The lag line was drawn on the opposite side of the circle, also just outside with its center touching the

circle. Lagging just meant shooting to come as close to the lag line as possible; the one who shot closest would go first.

“Wait a minute!” Jimmy Johnson cried. “I’m saying Bucky will win. Play him for keepers, Bucky. You can get that blue mib away from him.”

“We don’t play for keeps,” Willis objected. “We only play for fair.”

But the circle of watchers had decided they wanted the excitement of a game played for “keepers,” instead of for “fair,” in which case marbles are returned to their owners.

Bucky joined them. “Come on, Willis. For keeps this time.”

Willis closed his eyes against the sight of the ring of bright marbles. Closing his eyes was a mistake. It pulled him back into the present where he was dizzy and hurt and weak. He opened his eyes and focused once more on the marble shoot.

They had been eleven that spring, he and Bucky and Jimmy Johnson, a year marked in memory because Bucky and his family had moved away that summer.

He could see all the marbles, clear against sky and tree branches above him. Playing for keeps! If he had known, he wouldn’t have put out that sky-blue mib. There were two others out there that he didn’t want to lose; one was a special shade of green like the first leaf of summer and one was mixed red and gold. They were out there now. He couldn’t take them back. And he’d just sound like a coward if he insisted on playing for fair when Bucky and everybody else wanted the game played for keeps. Willis thought that for him it would be enough to win. He wasn’t interested in taking Bucky’s hoodles and mibs, but he didn’t argue. He just eyed the lag line and gave it his best shot. Then Bucky shot.

“Bucky’s closer,” someone in the little crowd of onlookers called.

But Bucky said, “Measure it.”

Willis was closer and had the right to go first. How was he supposed to have a chance to win when everybody was rooting for Bucky?

Willis took his shooting position, carefully chose his spot, and then knuckled down. One knuckle had to touch ground right up to the moment the shooter left the hand.

“No h’isting!” Jimmy Johnson warned.

Willis ignored him; he knew enough to keep his hand down.

“No hunchin’!” Bucky laughed to show his advice was a joke.

Willis’s eyes moved over the ring, estimating distance, choosing a target, aiming. Knuckle down, hand steady so it couldn’t hunch forward, he shot. Bucky’s black agate marble, his “aggie,” was propelled from the ring. Willis reclaimed his shooter, took aim again and this time bagged his own green marble. In rapid succession he took two more of Bucky’s marbles. He now had four marbles. To win he needed three more. He took aim, but the shooter slipped from his fingers before he was ready.

“Slip!” he called and reached to retrieve the shooter for a second try.

“No slip!”

“That was no slip!” the watchers called.

“If it doesn’t go more than ten inches, it’s a slip,” Bucky intervened. “Let’s measure it.”

“I’ll measure it,” Jimmy said and pounced on the shooter sending it flying out the other side of the circle. “Anyway, it was more’n ten inches.”

“Yeah, ten inches at least,” somebody else said.

Willis didn’t mind giving up his turn when he lost it fair, but he didn’t like being cheated out of it. Now there was no way to prove a slip. He picked up his shooter and moved back to let Bucky have a turn.

One—two—three, Bucky shot straight and picked up three marbles in a row, two of his own and one of Willis’s. He took aim at Willis’s mib with the snow swirls in it. It spun clear of the ring. He took aim at the red and gold marble Willis thought of as “fireball.” The shooter hit it hard and took it out of the ring. Two more and the game would be Bucky’s.

“Atta boy, Bucky.”

“Knuckle down.”

Bucky aimed and made a square hit on the sixth marble in a row.

Willis thought Bucky was a sure winner. A cloud over the sun cast the ring of marbles into darkness. For a moment Willis knew again that in reality he was lying on the forest floor with his life’s blood slowly draining away. Time was passing. Help wasn’t coming.

The shadow shifted and the ring of marbles reappeared. Willis saw that Mary Ellen had pushed through to the front of the circle of watchers. Hers was the shadow that had fallen over the ring.

Bucky looked up at her too, but Mary Ellen kept her eyes on the three marbles still lying inside the circle. She looked very solemn.

Bucky knuckled down, took aim, and fired his shooter into the ring. It missed. Without a word, he picked up the shooter and moved out of the way.

Willis shut out everything else. He could still win if he'd just concentrate. He settled his shooter just right on the curl of his index finger, hit it with his thumb and saw it take out a marble. He now had five marbles.

He fired again and collected his sixth marble. A stir went through the spectators. Willis and Bucky now each had six marbles. Only Willis's blue mib was left in the ring. If Willis missed this shot, Bucky would win for sure. Willis didn't care so much about winning any more. But he cared about that sky-blue mib. And he cared about Mary Ellen. Of course, Bucky did too. Her showing up like that was probably why Bucky missed his seventh shot. No, Willis didn't care so much about winning, but he hated to lose in front of Mary Ellen.

Now there was just one marble left. If it wasn't Willis's on this shot, it would be Bucky's.

A jostling for position ran through the spectators.

"No hunchin'!"

"Don't h'ist it now!"

Willis lifted his head and for a wonder Mary Ellen met his eyes. For a long moment, he saw her eyes as blue as the sky-blue nib he stood to lose.

Somebody said, "Knuckle down, Willis."

But Mary Ellen didn't say anything.

"Get it, Willis!"

Somebody was rooting for him after all. Mary Ellen's solemn face eased into a smile, and Willis knew that the voice in the crowd wasn't the only one on his side.

And Bucky saw the smile too. He moved forward, clapped Willis on the shoulder, and said, "Take your best shot, Willis!"

And Willis did.

The shooter seemed to move in slow motion. It made solid contact with the last marble and the marble sailed toward the edge of the ring.

For him to win, it had to go out and the shooter must leave the ring too. If the shooter stayed inside the ring on this last shot, that final marble would be put back and Bucky would get another turn.

The marble rolled over the ring and away. And the shooter followed it. Willis had won.

“Good shot!” Bucky said and sounded as if he meant it.

Willis carried his marbles in a leather drawstring bag. He took them out and counted them several dozen times that spring, over and over, admiring their colors and the way they caught the light. He played and lost and played and won. But in each game he put aside the marbles he had won from Bucky so he couldn’t lose them to someone else who might want to play for keeps.

When Bucky came to say he and his family were moving away, Willis knew he’d lost his best friend. The night before the Webbers were supposed to leave, Willis wrote a note that said, “I didn’t want to play for keeps.” He tied it to his leather bag of marbles, with all the marbles inside, and left it by Bucky’s front door.

The first thing next morning he went back again to say goodbye. He was too late. Everybody was gone and Willis had never been sure Bucky had gotten the marbles.

He wished he could see old Bucky now. He’d like to tell him that when you’re dying you don’t always relive your whole life, that the one thing he’d relived was that marble game. Bucky would know which one.

Through light and gloom, horses approached, and someone shouted, “There’s ten or a dozen Rebs here. Check ‘em for survivors!”

Willis opened eyelids that were heavier now. The ring of marbles, bright as the sun, was blotted out once more. Only this time it wasn’t Mary Ellen’s face between him and the light. It was somebody in blue who was holding his bayonet poised above Willis.

To the sun-haloed face, Willis said, “It’s your turn, Bucky. Take your best shot.”

A dumbfounded Union corporal deflected the force of his blow and sent his bayonet into the ground.

“We’ll take this one in,” he said to the man beside him.

“Begging your pardon, Corporal, but the colonel said no more wounded prisoners. We ain’t got the beds for ‘em.”

“We’ve got a bed for this one. He’s an old friend.” Then speaking just to himself, Corporal Webber added, “Though how he knew me behind this beard and him delirious, I sure don’t know.”

Later, when Corporal William Webber stooped beside a camp bed in a tent full of sick and wounded prisoners, Willis asked, “Why’d you spare me? This is supposed to be a war, y’know.”

“Yeah, I reckon it is,” Bucky said, “but it wasn’t my idea to play for keeps.”