On Sunday morning, February 20, 1865, Woodstock Sentinel newspaper editor Abraham Smith ran into Woodstock’s Frank Hanaford near the Chicago train depot. This was surprising, because Hanaford, along with several other members of McHenry County’s 15th Infantry Regiment, had been taken prisoner the previous October near Acworth, Georgia. He had been sent to the infamous Andersonville prison. As far as anybody knew, including his family, Frank Hanaford was still imprisoned. What was he doing in Chicago that late February morning?

Five months earlier, in September of 1864, a month prior to Hanaford’s capture, Union forces led by William T. Sherman captured Atlanta. Fearing Andersonville would be a prime target for a Union attack, the Confederate forces began transporting Andersonville prisoners by rail to other prison camps in South Carolina and coastal Georgia.

During these prisoner transfers, many Union soldiers attempted escapes from their railcars. Although most of these escapes failed, a small minority succeeded. On December 11, 1864 - a wet and freezing night - the Confederate train Hanaford was aboard broke down near Thomasville, Georgia. Due to the extreme cold weather that night, Union prisoners were allowed exit the railcars and build fires to warm themselves – inside a circle perimeter of Confederate guards who were doing likewise.

Hanaford and nine others had been looking for an opportunity to escape. They made their move. Throwing their blankets over their shoulders and trembling with fear, they boldly walked past the guards who stood closely around their warm fires oblivious to the escaping prisoners.

When their absence was discovered, prison guards pursued them with blood hounds. Three days later, five of the escapees had been recaptured, two of which had been shot and wounded. Hanaford and four other soldiers, two from Woodstock, one from Nunda (Crystal Lake) and the fifth from Wauconda, managed to elude recapture.

They set out on a daring adventure through unknown enemy territory deciding to head east in search of the St. Marys River in hopes of following it to the eastern coast which was under Union control. The escapees had very few supplies; their blankets, one pint of beans, one pint of corn meal, a bit of salt, one tin cup, one match and a crude map they had drawn while on the train plotting an escape.

Travelling at night and resting during the day, the group never spoke above a whisper. Often losing their way in the swampy landscape of south-eastern Georgia, there were several times they narrowly escaped recapture by confederate patrols. On more than one occasion, they had to fight off dog attacks with nothing but stick clubs.

Foraging for food along the way, they occasionally risked discovery by stealing chickens and sweet potatoes from local farms. They even managed to steal a turkey for a fine Christmas meal. They cooked the food they managed to find in a discarded cast iron kettle they had found along the way, also using it to transfer hot coals for starting fires.
Eventually finding their way to the St. Marys River, they managed to steal a couple of boats and spent several cold nights paddling 85 miles east to the mouth of the river on the Atlantic coast. There, twenty-two days after escaping, they happily found ‘Old Glory’ flying at Fort Clinch. Hanaford recalls “Words cannot describe the joy I felt when I beheld once more that glorious old banner floating in the breeze.”

Hanaford and his companions eventually secured passage on Union cargo ships heading north and made their way to New York City. From there they caught a train to Chicago, where Abraham Smith was astounded to find him. Smith loaned enough money to Hanaford and his companions to buy train tickets for the last leg of their journey, back to Woodstock. Hanaford and the rest were greeted with shocked amazement when they finally arrived home in Woodstock and shared their adventurous tale.

For those interested in in additional details of Hanaford’s escape and subsequent adventure, the February 22, 1865 Woodstock Sentinel newspaper article is available on microfilm at the Woodstock Public Library (or online at Newspapers.com). In addition, there is also a detailed first-person interview account of Hanaford’s adventure housed in the Woodstock Public Library’s Local History reference collection. Ask for details!