

CIVIL WAR HERO JOHN WILDER SETTLED IN MONTEREY

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John Wilder is a well-known figure in Civil War history. Much has been published about his life and career. The most well-known and authoritative book-length biographer is Samuel Williams. The best account of his life in the Upper Cumberland is John Roy Dillard's *Monterey*. Much of the material for this essay was collected by Charlene McClain of the TTU library staff.

Wilder was born in New York state in 1830. Moving at age nineteen to Columbus, Ohio, he found work as an apprentice in a foundry. After several years he moved to Indiana in 1857 and established an independent foundry. Four years later the business employed about one hundred workers. With the beginning of the Civil War, Wilder organized a light artillery company, and he became captain of a company in the Seventeenth Indiana Infantry. Within less than a month he was made lieutenant colonel of the regiment. In 1863 Colonel Wilder received permission to mount his troops, and eventually the unit earned the nickname "lightning brigade." Also in 1863 Wilder armed his troops, financed through a bank loan, with the new Spencer repeating rifle, which held seven rimfire cartridges.

The ultimate test of Wilder's brigade was the Battle of Chickamauga in September of 1863. The Confederate commander, General Braxton Bragg, lured the Union army under General Rosecrans, into a trap at Chickamauga Creek. On the second day of the battle Wilder's troops were surrounded. That night Wilder had his troops build numerous campfires over a broad area to make the enemy believe they were a larger force. About eight o'clock the 17th discovered an escape route and exited the area without losing a man.

Several days later the Confederate forces attempted to cross Chickamauga Creek over two bridges. Wilder's 17th Indiana deployed to guard Alexander's Bridge, along with the 98th Illinois. Wilder commanded fewer than 1000 men, and the Rebel infantry numbered about 8000. For about five hours Wilder's brigade contained the Confederate forces, but eventually fell back before establishing a new line.

Wilder's brigade and Minty's cavalry stopped several Confederate brigades through bravery and the use of Spencer repeating rifles. Finally the Rebels broke off the attack late at night. Wilder and Minty, and the bravery of their men with superior arms, saved the Union army at Chickamauga Creek, and the army survived to fight another day, although the Confederates eventually lost the general battle of Chickamauga. In October of 1864 Wilder resigned his commission in the army because poor health. He moved the Chattanooga and made a general survey of the natural resources in the Upper Cumberland region. He found iron ore and coal in adjacent areas of Overton, Fentress, Roane and other counties. Founding the Roane Iron Works in Rockwood in 1807, General John Wilder and his business associates bought about 500000 acres of Upper

Cumberland land, as well as additional property in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia. He built one of the South's first blast furnaces in Rockwood. Wilder's wife, Martha Steward Wilder, died at their home in Johnson City in 1893 at age 59, and later that year John Wilder moved to Monterey. After four years he accepted an appointment from President McKinley to operate a federal pension agency in Knoxville. Moving to Knoxville, he bought a small farm there, but spent a considerable amount of time in Monterey; in 1910 he moved permanently to Monterey. While he served as head the pension office appointment in Knoxville, Wilder became seriously ill. A young nurse, forty years younger than Wilder, became his full time attendant. Time that the two spent together engendered a romance, and in 1904 they married. John Wilder was age 74 and Dora Lee 28. After the marriage Dora Lee completed her education and became a Medical Doctor; she practiced as a physician in Monterey. The couple would spend the remainder of their lives in Monterey, where they built a large, comfortable two-story home, which still stands. Wilder also built the Imperial Hotel (1909), a fifty room establishment which was considered a luxury hotel. This was a very popular hotel for railroad travelers and for local residents who enjoyed dining in the restaurant. It was General Wilder's favorite place to eat, and other diners would see him enjoying huge plates of home cooked food. Wilder did not consume alcohol or use tobacco, but he loved food. One observer noted five corn cobs beside his plate, all neatly stacked. As a second course his wife Dora Lee brought him additional food from the kitchen. General Wilder was a large man, six foot two inches tall, and he was somewhat overweight, particularly in his older age. His eyes were penetrating, and he had worn a goatee beard since early manhood. He worn derby style hats, bow ties and high boots. He was an intelligent man with impressive historical knowledge. Geology was of particular interest to him.

John Wilder and Dora Lee usually stayed for an extended time each winter at their home in Florida. In 1917 General Wilder died on one of these annual trips. His health had been precarious for several years, and he died at age eighty-seven after only a few days in bed. He body was carried to the family cemetery plot in Chattanooga, and an elaborate funeral celebrated his burial.

"Cumberland Tales," created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region's history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tntech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu.

*Read more Cumberland Tales at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>