

A LOOK AT COOKEVILLE'S CAVALRY TROOP A

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(The following troopers were interviewed in the early 1990's: Frank Barnes, Bill Bilyeu, James Bullock, Hugh Childress, Alfred Gill, Hugh Lawhorn, James Mitchell, Lloyd Murphy, Roy Hugh Sullivan, Bill Terry, and Harvey Whitaker. Their words have been incorporated into the following narrative.)

In the aftermath of World War I, significant challenges faced the National Guard across the United States. In Tennessee, for example, guard leaders found it difficult to both maintain their existing units and to also form new ones. A report from Tennessee Adjutant General E. B. Sweeney to Governor A. H. Roberts (1919-1920) noted that one Aero Squadron and five troops of cavalry were in the process of formation. But organizing efforts were inadequately supported. Brigadier General William C. Boyd, the Adjutant General in 1923, bemoaned, "The state now appropriates only \$21,900 for the support of 2,500 National Guardsmen."

In Knoxville, a young lieutenant, A. J. Cockrell, organized a unit, designated Company A. This troop was part of a federally recognized regiment consisting of units from Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee. (In time, and after numerous reorganizations, the regiment became the 109th Cavalry, Tennessee National Guard.) However, Lieutenant Cockrell had trouble assembling a satisfactory unit and in May, 1926, it was reorganized in Cookeville.

Harvey B. Ragland became Company A's new commander. Ragland had impressive credentials, having served as an artillery officer in World War I and subsequently as a National Guard officer in Illinois.

The troop first maintained its headquarters in the basement of a business building on the Cookeville town square, and the men drilled on the streets nearby. The troop even utilized the courthouse square for inspections conducted by out of state army officials.

Meanwhile, within days of the establishment of the troop in Cookeville, several Cookeville men, who from the next few years would play prominent roles in the troop, entered into a corporate agreement and legally became "Troop A Association of Cookeville Tennessee." The purpose of the association was to maintain a club for social enjoyment in connection with the local troop. Among other activities, the organizers intended to form a golf club with a club-house and to provide stables and athletic fields for members of the association and for the troop.

Some of these plans were quickly carried out. Stables were constructed as well as a nine-hole golf course with sand greens. The association members also formed a polo team (at the time the only one in Tennessee), which played on the golf course. The team competed against other cavalry units including one in Birmingham, Ala., and played sometimes with two teams formed from within Troop A.

The first company commanders served brief terms. Ragland, who resigned his commission in 1928, was replaced by John Mitchell, who in turn resigned later in that year.

Stacy Wilhite, whose father owned the property housing the guard activities, took command for less than two years. Although involved briefly, these men nonetheless firmly established the troop. During Wilhite's last year as commander, members of the "Troop A Association paid \$4,783 for 65 acres more or less about four miles from the town square. The Putnam County Herald of July 31, 1930, reported that the troop had "torn down the old stables on D. C. Wilhite's place east of town, and will shortly begin erection of a modern new stable and drill barracks at the farm purchased from Campbell Bohannon." The troop association then sold this acreage to William H. Crawford – a newly-promoted captain – who became commander of the troop. The new leader was active in various business endeavors and, who, in the early '30s, served one term as sheriff. He led Troop A until June 1940, and his farm remained the troop's permanent home until it disbanded.

Once underway in Cookeville, the unit had little difficulty maintaining its full complement of 65 men. During the nearly 14 years of existence, at one time or another, over 400 men were on the Cookeville troop rolls. Typically the men were 18 or 19 years old when joining. Membership in the troop paid one dollar a month for drill and \$15 for summer camp. Numerous men did not complete their three-year enlistment, many having left for employment reasons.

The unit was primarily a local institution. Approximately 40 percent of the total number came from Putnam County, including Cookeville, the others from surrounding counties.

The cavalrymen interviewed had various reasons for their having joining the guard. Captain Crawford was instrumental in enlisting several men, a few of them under age! Frank Barnes remembered that Crawford “had quite a bit to do with it...that’s the reason I got in earlier (than I should have) at 16.”

Bill Bilyeu told a more elaborate tale: “I got hangin’ around the courthouse over there, watching these guys drill. I thought boy, that’s real nice. Sure would love to be a cavalryman, you know. And that uniform and then, those horses...I said to Hubert (Crawford) one day, I said ‘Hurbert, I’d like to get in the cavalry.’ And he said ‘How old are you, Bill?’ I said ‘I’m 14.’ He said ‘You’re 17.’ I caught on to what he meant, and we went downstairs, and he said ‘Ziney (Zina Mitchell, a unit sergeant), write Bill up here, and fix him up and give him a uniform’...And Ziney knew I wasn’t 17. He said ‘Bill, how old are you?’ And before I could open my mouth - Hurbert talked fast - he said ‘He’s 17, he’s 17, he’s 17.’”

Alfred Gill stated, “I didn’t have no relatives (in the cavalry), but I had a lot of friends that were in there. Milton Acuff and I went in together...school was out and (Acuff) wanted to know if I wanted to go join the National Guard with him.” Harvey Whitaker reported. “I had a real good friend in there that I respected very much. Just got interested.”

For others, the small amount of money was attractive. Hugh Lawhorn’s comments expressed the situation exactly, “...(T)he thirties was a hard time, you know. We had the depression on. And every dollar counted back then... And (so) I got in the National Guard.”

James Bullock joined because he “wanted to get away from farming.”

“I was a country boy, never been nowhere,” said James Mitchell. Roy Hugh Sullivan remembered. “At that time, there was little that you could do for entertainment. The National Guard had horses. If you were a member, you could check a horse out..and ride, like Sunday afternoon. At the that time, I got in mostly just (as) a sort of social thing.”

The men who joined the cavalry guard were obligated for once-a-month Sunday morning drill at Camp Walton, located on Crawford’s property. The men usually followed officially prescribed rifle and pistol practice, mounted drill, dismounted drill, and classroom work.

The men also cared for the horses and cleaned the barn although, at times, some caring for the horses and cleaning was done by staff on permanent duty. In addition to the monthly drills, members went to annual summer encampments. They occasionally served as honor guards at military funerals, attended and sometimes gave displays of horsemanship at civic ceremonies. Also, at the governor’s discretion, troopers were occasionally utilized as part of the state’s police power.

The enlisted personal were issued uniforms - shirt, pants, campaign hats, and shoes (with leggings in the beginning, but in the mid-30s shoes were replaced with laced boots).

With a twinkle in his eye, Bill Terry remembered, “I guess we were pretty nattily fitted out.” Some men remember receiving only a khaki issue, others both woolen and khaki uniforms. The men were responsible for maintenance of their uniforms, which were usually kept at the cavalry barn. The officers, of course, bought their own uniforms.

Most of the young men who enlisted were already familiar with horses, but a few exceptions were remembered: “One of the things that older members got a kick out of (was) getting new people that couldn’t ride too well and have a little fun on ‘em.

Somebody wasn’t used to horses, ‘cause these horses were tough mount animals. They weren’t easily handled.”

Young males working and playing together was an important element in creating an effective unit, but the success and stability of the troop can be traced, in part, to Hubert Crawford’s style of leadership.

“It was kind of a loose, and easy group,” said Lloyd Murphy, Roy Hugh Sullivan agreed.

“Nobody was uptight about anything. It was just a ball.... Their men all respected them (the officers). Hubert Crawford liked everybody – it was more like a big family to him, I think.”

At summer camp in northern Georgia, where the weather was described as “hot as fire,” the typical trooper’s day began at about 6 o’clock, reveille and breakfast about 6:30. One trooper remembers, “At 7, we’d go to the picket lines. We’d ride out into Fort Oglethorpe and do maneuvers as prescribed... We’d get back in about 11:30...get the horses tied up, brushed down, cooled off, then (it was time to get) our rations back at the mess hall. And sometimes we’d go on overnight maneuvers.” The men left behind in camp did close order, foot drill, and drills with either Springfield or Enfield rifles.

In October 1939, the cavalrymen began to hold drills twice weekly, and 100 percent attendance was required of troop members.

Training in combat maneuvers and other emergency tactics were soon instituted.

In October 1940, the 109th Cavalry was officially converted and absorbed into a 155mm howitzer regiment of the 181st Field Artillery.

After 14 years, Cookeville’s cavalry troop disappeared.

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



Chuck Johnson brought in this photo showing the old barn, named Camp Walton (the sign is on the building in the back), where men who joined the cavalry guard participated in the once-a-month Sunday morning drill in the 1930's. The men usually followed officially prescribed rifle and pistol practice, mounted drill, dismounted drill and classroom work. They also cared for the horses and cleaned the barn and occasionally served as honor guards at military funerals, attended and sometimes gave displays of horsemanship at civic ceremonies.

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