

GUERRILA BANDS HASSLED  
UPPER CUMBERLAND DURING  
CIVIL WAR

While Major Battles took Place

Some Distance Away

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During the Civil War, the people of the Upper Cumberland people didn't have to worry much about Confederate and Union armies invading their land. Major battles around Murfreesboro, Knoxville and Nashville were – by the travel conditions of the day – very far away.

But they did have to worry about and deal with another side of the Civil War – the guerrilla war that engulfed the region. In this warfare involving guerrilla bands, outlaw gangs and neighbors preying on neighbors, the people suffered not only from the violence but from the material shortages that accompanied the fighting.

The violence was the first challenge upper Cumberland residents encountered. Because there was until late in the war no Union or Confederate force capable of bringing stability to the region, lawlessness and disorder prevailed as Union and Confederate sympathizers made war upon one another. A mere rumor that a family supported one side or the other was often all that was needed to provide a raid by the opposing side's partisans.

The raiders burned houses and barns, carried off cattle, hogs and household items, took the meat from smokehouses and corn from the cribs and abused family members. On occasion, partisans murdered selected people in the family – usually the father or adult sons. Although some of the guerrillas such as Champ Ferguson and David (Tinker Dave) Beatty had at least a loose affiliation with the Confederate and Union armies, many of the raiders merely used the war as an excuse to rob and murder their neighbors. Instead of being soldiers, they were bushwhackers; instead of being defenders of a cause, they were outlaws.

The guerrilla and bushwhacker bands forced many of the Upper Cumberland families to resort to deception. To prevent his hams and bacon from being taken, one farmer in Cumberland County hid the meat in a nearby cliff crevice, retrieving the food only as the family needed it. Other hid their cattle in thickets or secreted their farm animals in caves or heavily wooded hollows. Another farmer stored his dried corn in the wall of his house.

Because of the lawlessness, trips to supply centers outside the Upper Cumberland became extremely dangerous. Marauders often ambushed those residents who undertook such journeys. One outlaw band killed a man for a mere 25 cents as he was returning from a trip to Nashville. A Cumberland County farmer met the same fate as he traveled home

from Kentucky with coffee, calico and other necessities badly needed by his family and neighbors.

Almost completely shut off from outside supply sources, the Upper Cumberland people used their ingenuity. To make up for the shortage of beef and pork, area residents hunted squirrels, rabbits, goundhogs, and quail. Because both guns and ammunition were in short supply, the hunters often had to catch the game with dogs and snares. Wild grapes, blackberries, hickory nuts, black walnuts and other wild foodstuffs supplemented the people's diet.

As sugar became hard to obtain, many people tapped maple trees and made syrup and sugar. Some sweetened their food with honey or sorghum molasses. For tea, they harvested sassafras. A baking soda substitute came from corncob ashes. Because coffee was so difficult and expensive to obtain, area coffee drinkers experimented with substitutes such as parched corn, rye, barley or toasted okra seed which they ground into granules and boiled. According to one experimenter, the toasted okra seed made the best coffee substitute.

Salt, needed for meat preservation as well as for food seasoning, was the commodity in shortest supply. People fortunate enough to have a smokehouse dug up the dirt floor and leached out of the soil salt that had accumulated over the years from brine dripping off the curing meat. The dark brown substance left by the leaching process was filled with impurities, but the people concluded that it was better than having no salt at all.

Because factory-made cloth and leather goods were often not available during the war, Upper Cumberland residents had difficulty keeping themselves clothed. Housewives carded wool and cotton, spun the fibers into yarn, and wove the yarn into cloth. To color the fabric, they used dyes made from weeds, tree bark and roots. Sediment found between the layers of slate rock produced another long-lasting dye. Black walnut hulls provided one of the most common dyes. Weavers had to be vigilant, however, because bushwhackers on occasion raided homes merely to take the cloth.

Many men made their hats from lambs wool or wild animal skins. The "coonskin cap" of earlier times reappeared through necessity. Because tanneries operated infrequently during the war, family had to make shoes and boots from "rawhide," a leather made without proper dressing. This leather stretched when wet and shrank as it dried. The result was much discomfort for those who were clad in it.

Despite the material shortage and violence, most area residents stoically persevered. Often without any semblance of government and law enforcement, unable to attend church or to send their children to school and often lacking adequate clothing and food supplies, they used their wits and ingenuity to survive.

For these people, heroism emanated not from the glories of the battlefields but from the struggle to endure the war's day-to-day horrors. Instead of dreaming of medals and

citations, they quietly hoped for a time when they could raise their crops and their children in peace.

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