THE CIVIL WAR IN THE UPPER CUMBERLAND (Part 1)

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When the Civil War began in the springs of 1861, it soon became clear that it would touch the Upper Cumberland rather quickly. For months area residents has watched and waited as the nation stumbled toward war, and many had already taken sides in what looked to be an inevitable conflict. With the Confederacy's attack on Charleston's Fort Sumter and Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers to put down the Southern rebellion, the war began. Within days, news of these events arrived in the region, and the reactions began.

First came the cheering. Union and Confederate sympathizers alike almost seemed to welcome the war. For Confederate sympathizers, even though Tennessee had not formally seceded from the Union, there was no time to waste on politicians in Nashville arguing over joining the Confederacy: Now was the time for action. In Cookeville on April 21, just six days after Lincoln's decision to put down the rebellion, an angry but boisterous pro-Confederate crowd gathered to denounce Lincoln and his military plans and to urge Upper Cumberland men to organize for the fight. Within days after the meeting, Harvey Dillard and friends had organized the "Highlanders" unit which later became Company K in the 16th Tennessee Infantry Regiment. In White County, George Dibrell organized a similar unit that would become part of the 25th Tennessee infantry Regiment. In DeKalb, Jackson, Overton, and other regional counties where pro-confederates had control, similar activities were underway as spring gave way to summer and fall. Once formed into a company (about 100 would-be soldiers), the men usually elected their captain and lieutenants and then received a rousing sendoff, complete with speeches from prominent citizens of the community, tearful good-byes from mothers, wives, or girl friends, and loud cheers from onlookers as the men marched off to Confederate induction and training camps. High spirits were rampant with boasting about how quickly they would dispose of the hated Yankees to the north. Many firmly believed that one Southern soldier could whip at least 10 Yankees and predicted that the war would be over by Christmas. At this cheering stage enormous pressure fell on men in their late teens and 20s to join up or be labeled a coward or-even worse-a Yankee lover!

For Yankee lovers (better referred to as Unionist) who happened to be in pro-Confederate communities, the time had come to leave and quickly. Hatred of all things Union soon had Confederates spying on and harassing their Unionist neighbors. Union men fled northward to Kentucky, and many made their way to Union recruiting and training facilities near Danville. One pocket of Unionists who refused to leave and, if fact, forced their Confederate neighbors to run was the DeKalb County community of Alexandria. This was the home of Congressman William B. Stokes, a dedicated Unionist, who, when the war began, organized unionist men into the 5th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment (Union) and as the war continued enrolled Union men from throughout the Upper Cumberland. From DeKalb through White, Putnam, Jackson, and Overton counties, the majority of families were staunchly Confederate (with exceptions such as Alexandria's), but northern Overton County (today's Pickett County), most of Fentress was so Unionist that when Tennessee seceded from the United States, Scott seceded from Tennessee! With emotions out of control on both sides, neutrality was not an option in the summer of 1861 and neither was peace. As the state battled state in the larger war, here in the Upper Cumberland neighbor battled neighbor and, sometimes, brother battled brother.

After the cheering waned and men marched off to war, next came the violence.

Daily life remained fairly normal in the region for the first year of the war, but omens of bad times ahead soon developed. The leaders, political and non-political, largely went into the military and left the area. Judges, lawyers, county clerks, sheriffs, deputies, teachers, and even ministers joined up. Not surprisingly, courts ceased holding sessions, taxes were not collected, crimes went unpunished. In the early months of 1862, another blow to stability and order came with the fall of Nashville to Federal soldiers. The governor and legislature fled to Memphis, where a few months later the Union seized control as well. Now there was no state government, and the Union seized control as well. Now there was no state government, and the

Union occupiers did not station enough soldiers in the areas outside of Nashville and Memphis to maintain law and order. Complete anarchy descended on the Upper Cumberland, where the only "law" was the gun.

Not only did government collapse in 1862 but so did schools and churches. With no money for education and with many teachers gone off to war (most school teachers were male), schools were abandoned. Churches often had to struggle with partisan wrangling, with Confederate sympathizers and Unionists refusing to hold services with anyone who supported the wrong side. Fist fights, threats, and general pandemonium sharply divided congregations, causing churches to cease meeting. As the violence grew and spread through the region, the churches that did dare to meet were subject to vandalism or even armed attacks.

With anarchy came the rise of partisan or guerrilla bands, pledged to one side of the war or the other. Men who had remained at home were drawn into these groups, ostensibly to support the war effort but in reality to use the war for their own purposes. The most famous (or infamous) Confederate guerrilla was Champ Ferguson, a native of Clinton County, Kentucky, whose Unionist neighbors forced to flee south to White County early in the war. There, he, his wife, and daughter bought a small farm on the Calfkiller River, but Ferguson had no intention to till his fields. Instead, he gathered his Confederate neighbors and began to make raids into southern Kentucky and Tennessee Unionist communities along the state border. Ferguson became noted not just for killing Unionists and burning their homesteads but capturing and torturing his victims before he or his men executed them. In addition, Ferguson's band sized horses, mules, cattle, and even household goods and slaves and brought them to his stronghold in the Calfkiller valley where they sold their plunder to their neighbors. The war meant grief and misery to many, but to the guerrilla bands such as Ferguson's, the war meant profit.

On the other side of the guerrilla war was Unionist "Tinker" Dave Beatty. A farmer in Fentress County when the war began, Beatty maintained his neutrality until February of 1862, when local Confederates told him to take sides or face the consequences. When they began to harass him and his family, he formed his own partisan band and went after his tormenters. With occasional assistance from Kentucky Unionists, Beatty's men spent the remainder of the war chasing Confederate sympathizers out of their home county and the northern portion of Overton County, killing, Beatty later remembered, about 25 people.

Pomp Kersey in DeKalb and Cannon counties and Oliver Hamilton in Jackson were other Confederate guerrilla leaders, whereas Elam Huddleston and Elijah Kogier led Union bands near the state border. But beyond these known partisans were perhaps a dozen or more "bushwhacker" groups led by long-forgotten men who supported no one in the war except themselves. They many on occasion have waved a flag – Confederate of Union – but in reality they were out-laws using the war as their excuse to rob and murder. Not only did they attack people in their homes and steal anything of value, but they haunted the roads to seize the money that travelers had on their trips to purchase goods or to take the goods from them on their way back home. With no one to stop them except for a rare patrol by Union troops out of Nashville, the guerrillas and bushwhackers made war with impunity upon the hapless people of the region.

And then came the tragedy.

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