

PRE-CIVIL WAR DIARY SHOWS VALUE OF MEDIA

Putnam County Herald, Cookeville, TN: 7 October 1957.

The value of newspapers and other communication media is proved by a 100-year-old diary recently brought to light at the University of Tennessee.

This diary shows how ill-founded rumors, resulting from a lack of communication, kept residents of a Tennessee community in a state of unrest in the days prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

Reflecting the dark days of a century ago, the diary was penned by John Coffee Williamson, commissioner in Polk County.

Ben Harris McClary, Bradley County high school teacher writing his master's thesis at U. T., edited the diary as an example of middle-class sentiment toward pre-war events.

Covering the years 1858 to 1861, the diary lay in the Williamson family home in Benton until 1953 when it was moved to Dalton, GA. This move probably saved the diary from complete oblivion, as a fire later destroyed the Benton residence.

The diary's author was born in 1833 and died in 1898. A Democrat in a predominantly pro-Union region, Williamson had trouble deciding which side to take in the brewing conflict. However, the editor explains, pro-slavery newspapers and the oratory of Southern sympathizers swayed the diarist to join the Confederate army.

In an age with primitive newspaper service and no radio or television, the East Tennessee world of John Coffee Williamson was besieged by wild rumors about the approaching conflict.

One rumor noted by Williamson that helped heighten tension in the South had President Buchanan sending 10,000 soldiers to Charleston as early as 1860. The editor explains that at the time, the U. S. Army had only 16,000 soldiers and that only a few were stationed at Fort Sumter.

Apparently depressed by the threats of open warfare, the diarist wrote in 1860: "I believe that the Union is gone and that through the remainder of my life we will have Civil War."

With the slavery question a big issue, the presidential election of 1860 added to the turmoil of the times. On November 6, Williamson wrote in his diary that he had visited the polling places. Reporting his personal "Gallup Poll," Williamson stated that even the people of East Tennessee, "an abolitionist stronghold," opposed Lincoln.

Unlike the presidential election when the winner was known before the day ended, it was six days before the "rumor" of Lincoln's victory spread to Polk County. And on November 14, still not officially notified of the election result, Williamson wrote that it was "given up by all that Lincoln is elected."

The district's final misjudgment came near the diary's end. Williamson wrote: "Everybody that I hear is for the Union. Tennessee will not secede."

However, in 1861, Tennessee withdrew from the Union and, like Williamson, joined the Confederate cause.

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