

Storytelling And Fact-Collecting: An Interview With Author Webb Garrison

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Interview

STORYTELLING AND FACT-COLLECTING: AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR WEBB GARRISON

Theriot, Katie L.

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Civil War Book Review (cwbr): What first attracted you to the Civil War?

Webb Garrison (wg): All of my early years were spent in Covington, Georgia, 30 miles east of Atlanta. Though this town was not included in the March to the Sea, Garrard's cavalry burned bridges, gristmills, and the railroad depot during a raid. A vivid childhood memory centers around my grandmother, then 90-plus years old -- tall and gaunt, always dressed entirely in black -- who took sheer delight in telling over and over how as a girl she managed to hide a side of bacon where the Yankees did not find it when they plundered the farm on which she grew up.

cwbr: When did you begin writing? Was history, specifically the Civil War, always a favorite subject?

wg: My interest in writing (and publication) began very early. At about age 16 or 17 I was writing a monthly column for a nationally-circulated magazine in the postage stamp field. For quite a long time I wrote primarily for national magazines. *Ladies Home Journal* was using my "filler" vignettes regularly before age 20 -- and was paying \$25 per short item, a bundle in those days! Interest in history, as such, began very early -- stemming perhaps from reading everything in the public library that dealt with the "romantic past" -- Alexandre Dumas, Captain Frederick Marryat (author of a big series of sea stories), Russian novelists, and some early American works. Later, at Emory University, I was inevitably exposed to Bell Wiley and his classics *Johnny Reb* and *Billy Yank* plus lots of unpublished material.

cwbr: Many of your works draw from oral history and anecdotes. How do you research these?.

wg: A great deal of my "research" is done in my own files. For years I made extensive notes and filed them by subject any time I ran across something that interested me. When photocopies became readily available, they greatly increased the pace and scope of this process. The result is tens of thousands of pages of source material filed under several thousand topics -- usually with citations about author, title, publisher, and date.

cwbr: *Your recent book **Friendly Fire in the Civil War** (Rutledge Hill Press, ISBN 1558537147, \$19.95 hardcover) uncovers instances of what today we would consider accidental casualties. Does the shooting of Stonewall Jackson serve as a prototypical case of how friendly fire accidents often occur from confusion or incompetence?*

wg: The research technique outlined above accounts for Friendly Fire. Since the term did not exist in 1861-65, it is impossible to search for instances of friendly fire in indices. There may be some other way to do it, but my examples were accumulated as a result of extensive reading over at least 25 years. The shooting of Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville is almost universally attributed to firing by North Carolina troops. The Jackson matter is as close to a classic instance of friendly fire in 1861-65 as we have. Yet my daughter-in-law recently raised a really provocative question: "How do we know positively that the incident was accidental?" That set a lot of wheels spinning. I wound up with eight possible contributing factors such as Jackson's appearance on a pint-sized horse and his brutal treatment of his officers and men, and I looked at each, resulting in an analysis that leaves it to the reader to decide whether or not Jackson might have been shot on purpose -- à la Vietnam "fragging."

cwbr: *You have written both on the famous and on "unusual persons" of the Civil War. Have you ever come to identify, even against your expectations, with any of the subjects of your research?*

wg: This sounds crazy, but the Civil War leader with whom I feel the closest affinity is William T. Sherman. I've waded through all five volumes of the *Official Records* on the Atlanta campaign, plus his home letters and a dozen or more biographies. Sherman may have been the most competent military leader on either side; my strong "identification" with him rests largely, however, upon his personal life. He had strong ties with the South and was down on his luck after returning to Union territory. Even though he never got the top command

that should have gone to him rather than to Grant, he never once complained about it. I have to differ with him in his racial views, but he's dead center in his thinking about politics and politicians -- as well as news-ravenous correspondents and rank-conscious generals.

Webb Garrison has published prolifically since his teenage years, selling more than 500,000 copies of books on subjects ranging from the Bible to the Civil War. His newest title, Civil War Hostages (White Mane, ISBN 157249199X, \$29.95 hardcover) will appear this spring.