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Recommended Citation

Wakelyn, Jon L. (2000) "Hangings In The Thicket: Vigilantism Was Law In The 'Dark Corner Of The Confederacy'," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss2/11>

Review

HANGINGS IN THE THICKET

Vigilantism was law in the 'dark corner of the Confederacy'

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Spring 2000

Pickering, David and Falls, Judy. *Brush Men and Vigilantes: Civil War Dissent in Texas.* Texas A&M; University Press, ISBN 089096923X

Awful things may be done by neighbor to neighbor in the pressured midst of civil conflict. In the southern states during the Civil War, citizens were persecuted sometimes because they did not show enough enthusiasm for -- or outright opposed -- the Confederate cause. Self-styled defenders of civil order often struck out against enemies to settle old scores, or acted out of the fears of unrest that war caused. In their fine effort at reconstructing the tragedies of internal civil war in northeast Texas, David Pickering and Judy Falls have written a chilling tale of wartime murder and revenge. As such, **Brush Men and Vigilantes** adds to growing evidence of civil war within the Confederacy, where guerrillas fought loyalists and where neighbor fought neighbor.

The authors begin their tales of wartime hangings in northeast Texas by describing the land and the settlers who lived through that ordeal. Northeast Texas, covered with thickets and river bottom, was settled by people from the upper and lower South. Although hard conditions made making a living difficult, some became successful cotton planting, slave-owning Confederates, whereas the more modest yeoman farmers resisted secession. Old land owning and family feuds resurfaced among those different classes and led to the nightmare of murder in the name of self-protection and defense of the southern cause.

The hanging of five men from two families -- the Hembys and the Howards -- by vigilantes is the centerpiece of this well-researched book. Through that event, as reconstructed from eyewitness accounts, the reader sees the fear slaveowners had of any voice that supported reunion. The Hemby and Howard account is contrasted with that of other atrocities, used to show how at war's end unionists would attempt revenge, and finally linked to how descendants of those

men have blotted that horrible scar from their family history.

Family differences and feuds are the reasons why the Hembys and Howards had to flee their homes. When they returned to harvest their corn crops they were set upon, forced to flee into Jernigan's Thicket, tricked into surrendering, given a false trial, and summarily hanged for treason, simply because they had refused to support what they believed was an illegal and irresponsible Confederate government. The authors contrast those hangings with that of Martin Hart, who had left Texas and joined the Union army. Operating as a guerrilla warrior, Hart marauded in northwest Arkansas, and northeast Texans believed him headed home to disrupt slavery. The vigilantes, supposedly acting under Confederate authority, arrested and hanged Hart and one of his lieutenants.

The story did not end there, as friends of Hart who had supported him also were tried and hanged. One, Austin Glenn, died merely because his link to Hart was an excuse for revenge against him personally. As the War came to an end, Frank Chamblee, a friend of the Hembys and of Hart, was hunted down in a thicket and shot, probably because he had humiliated the vigilantes by avoiding arrest and living right under their noses.

During the early days of Reconstruction, when military authority had collapsed and civil leaders had not yet assumed power, other atrocities were perpetrated over wartime grievances, and became acts of revenge. Pickering and Falls also point out that friends of the Hembys and Howards sought to prosecute the vigilantes for their murders. A former sheriff, members of the so-called home guard, and Knights of the Golden Circle, all successful cotton planters, were hauled into court. But Governor James W.T. Throckmorton, a former unionist who had joined the Confederacy, made certain those "patriots" never came to trial. Friends of the hanged unionists, however, tracked down one of the hangmen some years later and killed him.

At the turn of the century, E.L. Dohoney, an acquaintance of the Hemby and Howard families, left a memoir of their murders, but it was relegated to the dustbin of history, an embarrassment to the citizens of northeast Texas. Other ex-unionists had long left Texas to avoid further persecution, or out of fear of having their names linked with those hanged as traitors, thus taking their truth with them. As legends of a united Confederacy grew, to remember a divided wartime Texas filled with such atrocities was forbidden. Even the Hemby and Howard descendants were led to believe that the men had been terrorists.

Besides, they insisted that their ancestors had been killed in some other state. It is to the credit of Pickering and Falls that the truth of what happened to three Hembys and two Howards in 1862 in northeast Texas, and others there later, in that war of fear and retribution, is now no longer hidden from history.

Jon L. Wakelyn, professor of history at Kent State University, is author of nine books, most recently Leaders of the American Civil War, Southern Pamphlets on Secession: November 1860-April 1861, and Southern Unionist Pamphlets and the Civil War. He is at work on a study of the South's wartime loyalists' spokesmen.