

Confederate Guerrilla: The Civil War Memoir of Joseph Bailey

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Review

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Remembering the Guerrilla War

Civil War guerrillas existed in a world cloaked in secrecy as they participated in a blood feud of insurgency and counterinsurgency. After the war, most participants typically preserved their anonymity in order to maintain a postwar status quo. Thus, as regular Confederate veterans grew older, they published histories intended to justify their Civil War experience. However, irregular veterans remained more taciturn, in recognition of the danger that their actions could still provoke retribution many years later. For this reason, guerrilla activities often merged into local folklore, leaving scholars with little manuscript evidence from which to draw conclusions. Fortunately, Arkansan Joseph Bailey dictated his memoir in 1920 and substantially illuminated the shadowy world of the Confederate guerrilla. Combined with T. Lindsay Baker's insightful and carefully researched annotations, Bailey's edited memoir is a valuable addition to Civil War scholarship.

The subject of this memoir, Joseph Bailey, experienced a typical antebellum life and early career as a Confederate soldier. Born in eastern Tennessee in 1841, he spent his days on the family farm. In 1853 the Baileys migrated to the Crooked Creek Valley in present day Boone County, Arkansas, on the border with Missouri. Admittedly fond of books but less so of society, Bailey hoped to attend college. Instead, he enlisted in the Joe Wright Guards and witnessed the battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri. He lamented that his unit failed to engage the enemy while he envied his comrades who actively participated. Nevertheless, Bailey observed the consequences of combat and remained fervent in the hope of his own military contribution.

The Joe Wright Guards disbanded at summer's end and Bailey subsequently enlisted in the Sixteenth Arkansas Infantry in which he served during the

remainder of the war, except when engaged as a guerrilla. Bailey participated in all of the Sixteenth's major engagements through the summer of 1863. He steadily rose in rank from Sergeant and regimental color bearer up to Lieutenant. He participated in strategically important battles such as Pea Ridge, Corinth, and the lengthy siege of Port Hudson, where the Sixteenth eventually surrendered. The majority of the men received parole while the officers, like Bailey, were processed for transport to prison camps. However, Bailey boldly escaped and managed to return to his beloved Crooked Creek Valley.

In some of his commentary on the results of these large engagements, Bailey reflected a lifelong interest in military history as well as his personal study of the *Official Records* and published writings of other participants during the postwar era. Perhaps the most pointed example of this is Bailey's interpretation of Pea Ridge where he explained how the untimely death of Confederate General McCulloch decisively turned the battle. Bailey justified his lengthy digression because he personally observed McCulloch's body. As he remained unaware of any published eyewitness accounts of the general's death, he apparently believed he owed a contribution to the historical record.

If Joseph Bailey's Civil War participation ended with his surrender at Port Hudson, his narrative would still offer a worthwhile contribution, but it was his service over the next year that truly distinguishes this memoir from so many others like it. Upon his return home, Bailey was shot in the chest during a skirmish with raiding Federal troops. A physician diagnosed his wound as mortal, yet Bailey recovered. During his remarkable month-long convalescence, most of Bailey's neighbors in the Sixteenth were ordered to reassemble in southwestern Arkansas. Too ill to travel and with Federal forces increasing their control of the Arkansas River Valley, Bailey remained isolated. Upon the full restoration of his health, Bailey stated he was elected Captain of a company of fifty mounted men: Confederate insurgents in occupied Arkansas. Baker's careful archival search yielded no formal records of this independent company, making Bailey's recollections invaluable.

From September 1863 to October the following year, Bailey served with other men from his community in a running skirmish of continual guerrilla warfare. Bailey chronicled a violent year in which he typically hunted other men, repeatedly killed, continually hid, and narrowly escaped death himself. Occasionally, Bailey witnessed or dispensed acts of mercy, but admitted that such events remained exceptional. His company of 50 proved too large to

provision itself so they split into smaller bands. In these reduced groups, Bailey described how military discipline gave way to utilitarianism. Men joined the company and summarily discharged themselves according to their own preference. The only orders consistently followed remained those of the elected officer leading the mission at the moment. However, even this broke down into a bizarre experiment in democracy as Bailey described guerrilla debates over whether or not to execute prisoners. Overwhelmingly, prisoners were executed. This was the hallmark of guerrilla war everywhere.

Bailey portrayed an intensely personal conflict in which death often proved an intimate and unpredictable affair. In an ironic twist of fate, Bailey received mercy on one occasion due to his membership as a Mason. He later spared the life of a brother Mason despite the objection of his fellow guerrillas who protested that Masonic brotherhood would not save them if captured. Most of Bailey's opponents were Arkansas Unionists, many of whom he knew either personally or by reputation prior to the war. Because the Crooked Creek Valley was both battleground and home, Bailey's family and friends also played a role in guerrilla strategy. On one occasion, four Federal raiders visited Bailey's parents and a member of the party kicked his mother off the porch and injured her. Bailey testified that he participated in the pursuit of his mother's attacker who was summarily killed with all but one of his companions. Likewise, a Federal soldier once bragged to Bailey's girlfriend that they intended to kill her sweetheart. A few days later, Bailey had the unexpected opportunity to ambush the boastful Union officer. Chasing him down from behind, Bailey shot the man off his horse at three feet and secured his ostrich plume hat as a prize. Bailey even identified these men by name. Thus when he killed them and wore their clothing, he not only protected the Confederacy but he preserved his family's honor in a meaningful and personal manner.

Regardless of all success, Bailey and his comrades eventually succumbed to the Union's superior forces and unrelenting pressure they exerted on the noncombatants of northwestern Arkansas. By his account, Federals burned half the homes in the region and remaining families no longer possessed the capacity for adequate subsistence by the middle of 1864. Along with a tiny remnant of guerrilla veterans, Bailey slipped below the Arkansas Valley and rejoined his unit in the southern part of the state. Except for an extended return trip home to recruit for the Confederacy, Bailey spent the closing months of the war uneventfully in Arkansas and Texas.

Baker has produced an admirable and meticulous piece of editorial scholarship. Tracking down each existing edition of the memoir in multiple locations, Baker compared them all against each other for consistency. Baker largely left intact the full narrative of Bailey's recollections. Census data, official records, and diaries of Union soldiers have all been cross-referenced and thoroughly explained via Baker's extensive endnotes. The reader can rest confident that Clio has been satisfied and the veracity of the narrative established. On the whole, Baker also answered the vital questions raised by the narrative. He demonstrated that, like most guerrillas, Bailey acted primarily to defend his community in the most immediate sense. Also, while Bailey and his comrades failed to alter the war strategically, they succeeded in denying the Union a few soldiers that could have contributed elsewhere. Most importantly, Baker hypothesized that Bailey broke his lengthy silence due to the fact that he lived in Texas for thirty years. Far away from the setting of his guerrilla exploits, Bailey likely grew comfortable with the idea of sharing his secretive past as a lesson for his grandchildren's future.

Two additions could strengthen this already impressive effort. First, a lack of maps leaves the reader occasionally disoriented in the unfamiliar terrain of Crooked Creek Valley. Second, Joseph Bailey created an appendix in 1925 entitled, *Random Thoughts With Some Observations on Religious and Other Subjects*. This manuscript remains in the hands of one of Bailey's descendants. It is cited by Baker but is not part of the edited book. While the title suggests that it would not add materially to the Civil War narrative, the topic is provocative since Bailey never conveyed a religious attitude. In fact, he specifically claimed agnosticism even in the face of his own death. Combined with the knowledge that both Bailey and his wife were cremated, his religious views appear atypical from the common Confederate soldier. If this is true, it could further distinguish the uniqueness of Bailey's memoirs. However, without the appendix itself or some commentary on its conclusions, the question remains open. Nevertheless, this does not diminish Baker's worthwhile contribution. He has verified an extraordinary narrative and provided us a fascinating story that deepens our understanding of the violent Confederate home front.

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