

Bluecoat and Pioneer: The Recollections of John Benton Hart, 1864-1868

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Review

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Late in life John Benton Hart, with the encouragement of his son Harry, recorded his reminiscences of Civil War service and later experiences in the West. Hart served in the 11th Kansas Infantry (later converted into the 11th Kansas Cavalry) and after the war spent several years in Montana. Son Harry embellished his father's recollections, and some of the episodes recorded, especially some long conversations, beggar belief. Yet especially in the post-Civil War sections, the narrative is unfailingly interesting and in places quite revealing.

Students of the Civil War will find a few points of interest in the short portion of the manuscript dealing with Johnny Hart's military service. He recaptures some of the chaotic conditions along the Missouri-Kansas border, and the story of his struggle to get a purloined sweet potato properly roasted has a certain charm. Hart offers a refreshingly candid account of a panicky flight from Confederate cavalry; and a fine description of a rainy bivouac. There is good detail on the battle of Westport and more generally on the collapse of Sterling Price's final campaign in Missouri.

Johnny Hart is remarkably candid about his own ambitions and shortcomings. Always looking out for the main chance and remarkably able to get others to do his bidding, he frequently got into trouble, and the narrative is replete with not always credible tales of hairbreadth escapes. There are many stories of contacts with Indians—most notably Cheyenne and Crow. At one point, Johnny recounts how he and his partner tangled with a Cheyenne chief whom they seriously wounded and eventually scalped. "Like a couple fools," Johnny admitted, about an incident that "makes me feel ashamed to this day." (p. 49). On another occasion, he claimed to have pulled ninety-three arrows out of a dead soldier. He and his brother worked for a

Wells Fargo mule train for a while and showed great ingenuity in repairing wagon tires. His descriptions of the western landscape are quite good, and he has a knack for making the terrain features of his story--as in one tale of men trying to walk to Chimney Rock—particularly vivid. Eventually Johnny spent a good deal of time around Fort C. F. Smith on the Bozeman Trail in Montana. For the post's commandant, Lt. Col. Luther P. Bradley, the presence of Johnny Hart was a steady source of annoyance because Hart seemed to be always involved in some scheme or prank that landed him in trouble. He did manage to safely transport Bradley's annoying tenderfoot nephew from one fort to another, and apparently had some success as a mail carrier, but never walked the straight and narrow for very long.

Hart's attitude toward Indians reflected the prevailing racial and cultural views of his day, but he also showed occasional flashes of understanding and appreciation, especially for the Crow. Johnny presents a detailed account of the Hayfield fight with the Sioux and Cheyenne near Fort C. F. Smith and is especially good at describing the tactics employed by each side. A close observer of Crow customs, Hart to some degree understood tribal differences but could be simultaneously appalled and fascinated by the many Indians with whom he had contact. He noted the great respect paid to older warriors and realized that chiefs ruled with less than absolute authority. He respected the skills Indians displayed in an inhospitable environment, but the narrative of his own experiences with Indians again raises questions about Hart (and his son's) embellishments or fading memory.

John Hart confronted a formidable task of editing. Johnny Hart's recollections are in fragments—much original material was destroyed—and later additions by his son posed other problems. The editor pruned down the available material by two-thirds, worked hard to check details in his great grandfather's narrative, and forthrightly deals with the uncertain evidence and myriad questions of accuracy and believability. Readers will greatly appreciate his efforts and certainly find Johnny Hart's narrative to be an often enthralling read.

George C. Rable, University of Alabama, Emeritus is currently working on a study of the relationship between George McClellan, Abraham Lincoln, and the Army of the Potomac and a project indexing published primary sources dealing with the Civil War:
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