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Uncivilized War Comes to Huntsville

By Marjorie Ann Reeves

With the first invasion of the Yankees into North Alabama came destruction the citizens had never experienced before. The Yankees swept into Alabama quickly destroying as they came making many of the citizens of Alabama refugees in the year of 1862. The war flowed into Alabama on the Tennessee River after the Fort Henry loss as the first invasion in Alabama took place when the Union gun boats, the Lexington, the Conestoga, and the Tyler, bombarded Florence under the direction of Commodore Andrew H. Foote on February 6, 1862. On land, the Yankees came from Nashville, Tennessee, into Huntsville early in the morning on April 11th, with Gen. Mitchel's Army of 8000 Union soldiers capturing the city Huntsville of less than 4,000 individuals.

Local Huntsvillian Mrs. Chadick wrote in her journal that, "Truly our town is full of the enemy. There is a sentinel at every corner. Everybody keeps the front door locked, and I make it a point to answer the bell myself, not permitting children or servants to open it." No one knew whom to trust with family members against family and neighbors against neighbors. Gen. Mitchel's efforts to control the citizens of North Alabama included an attempt to force them to take the oath of the United States Government to send items to the mill, bring in provisions, go out of town, or buy

food. All businesses had to take the oath of loyalty of the federal government within three days or lose their business. He declared he intended to starve the city into submission.

On September 11, 1862, *The Huntsville Advocate* resumed their publication after the Union left Huntsville and summed up the past occupation. "We were under absolute military rule, subject to the orders of provost marshals, having to obtain passes to go outside of town, and at times to pass from place to place in town; pledges and oaths were extracted under dire compulsion; marketing was prohibited, provisions not allowed to come in; citizens ordered to be off the streets; arrested, kept in prison for days and weeks, not tried, and then discharged on pledges; negro evidence threatened against them, and arrests made on such evidence. Citizens were sent off to Camp Chase without trial or notice; houses searched, property taken without compensation or even receipted for; houses robbed, horses stolen, negroes decoyed off, wanton injury indicted upon many of our people and no redress given." Gen. Mitchel sent Col Turchin to Athens to rid it of Confederates. The city was ransacked, pillaged, and citizens abused. "Not during the remainder of the war was such wanton destruction of property seen by those men," wrote participant Sgt. George H. Putteney of the 37th IN yet Gen. Mitchel had no concern about Col. Turchin's devastation of the town of Athens. Years later the

citizens rejoiced in the news that Turchin died in an insane asylum.

Cassie Fennell was a young girl 18 years old attending school in Washington when Alabama seceded. She returned home to Guntersville and started a diary. She wrote, "Refugees from Madison County began to come to Marshall County. They felt safe on this side of the Tennessee River. With Huntsville captured, mail became erratic, but the refugees by land and water spread their news. The Yankees treat the negroes very badly in Huntsville. The Northerners were ruthless to all Huntsvillians by looting, trashing, burning homes, businesses, churches, and regularly jailing citizens without cause."

Miss Rowena Webster from Tennessee who had come to Huntsville because the invasion of her home now was caught in the invasion of North Alabama. She was arrested for carrying a tiny Confederate Flag and brought to Gen. Mitchel's tent. She wrote "He said, Don't you know that you are in open rebellion?" My reply, "I am a Rebel."

His response was "Don't you know that I could send you to Fort La Fayette?"

"He was surely no gentleman but an arrant coward and a tyrant. He seemed particularly bent on insulting the women and children and went into the Army for gain." The *Huntsville Daily Confederate* newspaper reported on November 12, 1862, the death of "his detestable lowness, Maj. Gen. O.M. Mitchel" died from Yellow Fever.

Families of Madison County wrote to their soldiers in the field about the Union attacks on their home. This affected the soldiers but Gen. Lee gave orders that the Southern soldiers could not harm the civilians when they traveled north. While walking through Pennsylvania, Private Henry Figures of the 4th AL recalled the Federal occupation of Huntsville and his mother writing recounting the Federal soldiers' behavior. Figures wrote home that he did not kill any farm animals assuring his mother that everything he ate was bought. Mattie Figures wrote in 1870 about her older brother Henry yearned to visit his family in Huntsville. Their mother, Harriet Stokes Figures, sought a pass to go to meet him at the Tennessee River. Gen. John Logan was the Union Commander in Huntsville at this time. "My Mother in her despair at my brother not being allowed to come within the Federal lines resolved to make a personal appeal to Gen. Logan. My Father, with influence to aid him, having failed, gave his consent, it was a last resort. After much thought it was decided, that my Mother should go alone, taking with her, one of the smaller children. I was the one selected, a little girl being deemed best. I was carefully cautioned as to my behavior, for the spirit against the Yankees, was strong in my little breast. As we walked up the broad graveled walk, I remember that my Mother held my hand very tightly. We were shown immediately into the large parlor. The General was seated in an easy chair at a table facing the window, from whence he could

overlook the street, he saw us come in and doubtless drew his own conclusions. I see it all so plainly, the heavy brutal-looking man, with thick black hair, worn rather long, small dark sinister eyes, a repellent face at best, in my young eyes, the embodiment of cruelty, which proved correct. He received us politely, asked me my name and I shook hands with him with great reluctance. My Mother made known her errand in an agitated voice, he refused pointblank, and as she persisted, the fiend in him, leaped to the surface, and he threatened her if she attempted to go he would send his soldiers and arrest her and my brother, and jail them both. At this I lost my fear and blazed out what big brother Henry would do, my Mother quickly put her hand over my mouth, or there is no telling what I would have said. Years after at a reception I heard of his death, and I was not sorry. The scene around me faded away and for the moment I saw and heard my Mother pleading to see her boy. I felt that act of fiendish cruelty had met its reward.” Henry died in the Wildness Campaign on May 5, 1864, without his family ever having the opportunity of seeing him again.

In 1864, Mrs. Octavia Otey, Madison County native, wrote in her journal, “It has been a year of trouble for our family, and also for the whole country. Anxiety about something to eat, something to wear, anxiety about everything... God only knows what will become of us.” “The other day when soldiers were passing, a Federal soldier asked Lucy (our little two-year-old) if she was a little Yankee? She said very shortly, no. I

told him I had insulted her very much a few days before, by asking her if she loved the Yankees?" Says he, "What do they expect to do when the very babies hate them." "Yes, there is a feeling of eternal dislike, and hatred, for our oppressors growing up in the hearts of the babes and children of this generation that will never be obliterated."

At the end of the war, Gen. Wilson and his men created a path of destruction through Alabama. What was not destroyed from earlier attacks was burned by Wilson and his men. All of Alabama was demolished making more people destitute, families made refugees, scattered with little food or jobs to be had with life continuing to be a struggle long after the war. For many years after the war, the people were a captured populace under reconstruction. It would take many generations for recovery, with scars and wounds still in existence, and family histories of suffering continued to be passed down.

The Author:

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