



HER War

Fighting Sarah Thompson

By Stephanie McCurry

Union women

in Greene County, Tenn., kept the Rebels hopping as they fought to stay loyal to the USA

Union troops in Confederate territory expected opposition from secessionist women. Confederates, however, hadn't anticipated having to do battle with Union-sympathizing Southern women. Unionism among Southerners was an unexpected and unwelcome development, and Confederate officials were forced to recognize the key roles women played in organizing dissent and opposing Confederate conscription.

As Confederates attempted to contain the damage to their military operations inflicted by Unionist networks and guerrilla bands, old prohibitions about violence against women went out the window. Military men began to pursue a startlingly harsh policy on the ground. One Confederate judge pressed President Jefferson Davis for "an iron rule enforced with an iron hand and hearts of stone" and no quarter for women. "The women and non-

combatants must be handled speedily and roughly," he advised. Against them "the most radical and severe treatment is required."

Few women left records of their anti-Confederate activities or what they suffered at Confederate hands. But Sarah Thompson did. And her powerfully moving account of the efforts of Unionists in the area of Greeneville, Tenn., makes brutally clear not only what Unionists endured for their principles, but why the Confederate government was forced to move so hard against the women.

Nobody in the Confederacy underestimated the Unionist threat. From the outset of the war, state governors—and

to a lesser extent Davis and his secretary of war—were aware of the continuing significance of Unionist opposition. Every governor's mailbag brought new reports, most of them from citizens informing on neighbors, of Unionist organizations, military companies, networks and secret societies. The reports came from every corner of the Confederacy, but especially from areas that had been the heartland of Unionism in the secession crisis: western Virginia, western and central North Carolina, north-west Georgia, northern Alabama, piney woods Mississippi, parts of Texas and East Tennessee, which as a region had defeated secession by a margin of 4 to 1.

With the onset of war, many men who had cast votes against secession nevertheless signed up and marched off with the army. Others kept their mouths shut and simply avoided military service, at least until April 1862, when the Confederacy enacted a draft. But others, including Sarah Thompson and her husband, Sylvanius, did not. They built a secret Unionist network dedicated to moving men across the mountain into Kentucky to enlist in the Union Army.

Sarah and Sylvanius operated in a dangerous local context of Confederate military occupation and surveillance. Their region of "up est Tennessee," Sarah noted in her diary, was by her estimation "a good dele more than one half union." After saboteurs burned five railroad bridges in November 1861, the entire area was under martial law. It took some serious planning to operate a Unionist network under the noses of Confederate officials, and Sarah made a careful record of the membership, not just of white men but of loyal white women and enslaved men and women who risked their lives in it.

In the spring of 1862, Sylvanius went over the mountains to enlist in the Union Army. When he came back to raise recruits for his company, he had to "ceep his self hid" and turned to Sarah to help him "as he had more confidens in me then eny one els." She was his aide, as she put it, approaching those she knew to be true to the Union cause, effectively serving as the local recruiting agent for the men he took over the mountain. She acted in league with other white Unionists and, as she is at

pains to point out, “the colerd pepell,” slaves of Union men and Rebels both. “We new who to trust,” she explained, wondering still at how strange it was that “these pore soles would work all day in thare mastes sarvas and then goo all night for what they called thare ease of freedom.” Most Southern Unionists were as pro-slavery as their Confederate neighbors, and many felt entirely betrayed by Lincoln’s turn to emancipation. But not Sarah Thompson. Hers was an anti-slavery and biracial Unionism rare indeed among white Southerners.

Sarah was a “union woming” in her own right. She had a clear political identity and was a linchpin in a political network that relied on women for success. This put her at great risk for, as Confederate officials quickly discovered, Unionist men did not operate as individ-

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uals, but depended on their friends and families. “I fear we will never be able to destroy guerillas while we permit their friends to remain amongst us,” said one officer. “Many men and women at home do more damage than the regular soldier, because they feed, harbor and conceal guerillas.” When Confederate troops came looking for deserters and Unionist bands, as they did in many parts of the South after 1862, the men were nowhere to be found. They were

often “lying out” in the woods—and women bore the brunt of the Confederates’ ire.

Like many others, Sarah Thompson became a target of brutal harassment by Rebel soldiers who valued the military intelligence they knew women to have. As early as 1862 in Greeneville, she says, Rebel soldiers were “surchen ever house to whip and kill union men and forse them to goo in ther army.” In the process they initiated a campaign of violence, including murder, against Union women. Sarah’s is a biblical account of the Unionists’ passage through the wilderness. And as she tells it, women no less than men were engaged as the enemy. They were threatened, plundered, burned out, knocked about and abused, she wrote, “in miny ways that wold not be proper for me to stat here.” “It was not anuff for the rebels to cary off all youe had but thay must burn yor barns and a hass and ravis yor wifes and darts [daughters] and hange by hes neck ar young boys to try to scare oute of them what thay did not knowe.” Sarah herself was threatened with the rope by soldiers in John Hunt Morgan’s unit before she and her children were taken by Union soldiers to Knoxville, then in Federal hands, in the fall of 1864.

Sarah Thompson’s vulnerability to violence at the hands of Confederate forces was exactly proportionate to her significance in the Unionist network she and her husband ran. It was in the fight with Unionists and with deserter bands that Confederates first confronted large numbers of women who defied the state’s authority to conscript, and undermined its capacity to wage war against the Yankees. Wherever resistance threatened Confederate military actions, the Confederate government waged war against its domestic enemies, and it did not spare women. □

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■ Sarah Thompson’s efforts for the Union were officially recognized in 1897, when a special act of Congress granted her a \$12 monthly pension.