

# “This is in Brief My Remembrance of My army Life” The Civil War Memoir of Louis Bir

J. D. FOWLER

Louis Bir was a typical Civil War soldier in most respects. He was young, only nineteen years old at the time of his enlistment in the Ninety-Third Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment in 1862, and he was anxious for a grand adventure. For the remainder of the war, Bir traveled across the Western Theater, experiencing the horrors of combat, the agony of wounds, and the monotony of camp life. Fortunately for future generations of historians, Bir was atypical of most Civil War soldiers in that he left a record of his experiences. This record offers a fascinating glimpse into the life of one “Billy Yank.”<sup>1</sup>

---

J. D. Fowler is assistant professor of history, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia. He is the author of *Mountaineers in Gray: The Story of the Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, C.S.A.* (2004) and *Awash in the Storm: Tennessee During the Civil War Era* (forthcoming).

<sup>1</sup>The best general studies of the experiences of Civil War soldiers are Bell Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (1943; reprint, Baton Rouge, La., 1996); Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (1952; reprint, Baton Rouge, La., 1995); James Robertson, Jr., *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (Columbia, S.C., 1988); Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Their Experiences* (New York, 1988); Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York, 1987); James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (New York, 1994); McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York, 1997).



Louis Bir in his Civil War uniform.

Courtesy Vicki Blemker

Bir's reminiscences, like other recollections of the war, paint a poignant picture of the hardships of army life. He vividly describes his hunger, the poor quality of food, and his many marches across the southern countryside. Because it was produced by, about, and for members of a unit or fellow veterans, Bir's account is categorized as a first-generation narrative. Often these records have serious limitations for students of the war. Many of the authors penned their histories decades after the events described, allowing time and distance to cloud memo-

ries and distort recollections. In addition, first-generation histories almost always portray the author and his unit favorably. Incidents of cowardice, desertion, or ineptitude often are not mentioned or are presented as aberrations. Also, these narratives, while usually paying hagiographical tributes to brigade and regimental officers, tend to omit important details about the heart of all Civil War regiments—the fighting men.<sup>2</sup>

Sergeant Bir's account, however, is different from unit histories in two important ways. First, it is not actually a unit history but rather a personal memoir. Apparently, Bir intended his recollections to be delivered as an oral presentation, perhaps to his fellow veterans in the Grand Army of the Republic. Also, his recollections offer us an unsanitized view of the war. Indeed, the most striking aspect of Bir's memoir, and what truly makes it unique, is the author's honesty. Bir's willingness to admit to being a thief, an immature boy who cried over practical jokes, and a racist gives much credibility to his entire story.

Several key points emerge that highlight the importance of this work. For example, it is odd that Bir does not give a reason for his enlistment. He does not express any patriotic sentiment, nor does he mention any community or kinship pressure he may have experienced. Either Bir expected his audience to understand his motivations for fighting for the Union, or he did not consider them worth mentioning. Perhaps if he intended his audience to be other veterans, he felt comfortable enough to let his guard down and speak openly about issues and events that other veterans would understand. For example, Bir talks candidly about pillaging with his comrades. Their bounty included pies, a turkey, chickens, honey, and a calf. He recalls a southern woman pleading with him

---

<sup>2</sup>A handful of historians have attempted to generate modern scholarly regimental studies using a variety of primary sources, including individual military records, census records, pension records, medical records, newspapers, diaries, and personal papers in order to create a composite picture of the men of a regiment—the basic unit of the Civil War armies. Leslie Anders's two books, *The Eighteenth Missouri* (Indianapolis, 1968) and *The Twenty-first Missouri: From Home Guard to Union Regiment* (Westport, Conn., 1975), are both first rate in their use of sources and their emphasis on the experiences of the common soldier. Likewise, Edward J. Hagerty's *Collis' Zouaves: The 114th Pennsylvania Volunteers in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, La., 1996), Douglas Hale's *The Third Texas Cavalry in the Civil War* (Norman, Ok., 1993), Ben Wynne's *A Hard Trip: A History of the 15th Mississippi Infantry, CSA* (Macon, Ga., 2003), and John D. Fowler's *Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, C.S.A.* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2004) are studies that go beyond the "bugles and bullets" to discuss motivation, socioeconomic status, war weariness, and the daily routine and struggles of ordinary combat soldiers.

and his fellow soldiers not to take her calf because it was all she had. However, he confesses that the Union troops ignored the old woman's pleas, killed the animal, and carried it away while being pursued by Rebel troops. Obviously, Bir felt no guilt for his actions, nor, apparently, did he care if his audience viewed him negatively.

Bir's memoir contains several graphic passages related to combat. He remembers killing his first man as his regiment retreated following Nathan Bedford Forrest's rout of Union forces at Brice's Crossroads. Even though Bir had undoubtedly fired into Rebel ranks before, perhaps wounding and killing any number of soldiers, this was the first time he had watched a man die in front of him and realized that he had taken a life. The memoir also contains gruesome reminders of the horrors of war. At the battle of Nashville he writes of seeing the man next to him cut in half by a shell and watching as his internal organs emerged from the shattered body. Later, as night brought an end to the fighting, he could not sleep because a Rebel soldier lying nearby had suffered a ghastly head wound. Bir watched and listened in horror as the soldier's brains oozed out with each of his final breaths. Such graphic portrayal is real and brings the brutality of war home to the reader.

Bir's account is also interesting because he neglects to discuss the Confederate soldiers in detail. In fact, he rarely refers to the Rebels as individuals. One gets the sense that they are simply the enemy. However, while Bir may have dehumanized his opponents, he does not apparently hate them. In fact, he makes no derogatory comments about the Rebels other than the mention that he and his comrades contracted lice by sleeping in an abandoned Confederate camp. He does remember Confederates shooting prisoners, but he also describes his anger over Union troops executing Rebel captives. He tells about the time a Rebel allowed him to ride a horse during an exhausting march toward Andersonville, and he recalls how he enjoyed listening to the Confederate bands sent to entertain the Federal troops at night. Even the death of his childhood friend does not appear to evoke rage or hatred. Indeed, Bir does not seem to have harbored any overt hatred for the men who tried to kill him for three years. In a sense, the Confederate forces appear to be just another obstacle, like the weather or lack of food, that must be overcome.

While Bir seems indifferent to southern soldiers, he apparently liked southern civilians. He became infatuated with a girl in Memphis, visiting her after the war to see if the spark could be reignited. Also, during a stint at occupation duty near Meridian, he helped local planters

convince the newly freed slaves to remain on the plantations as free laborers. Bir was forced to kill a freedman while performing his policing duties. His only regret was having to ride sixty miles round trip to report the killing to the nearest Provost Marshal. Bir's callousness here reveals one of the least likeable facets of his personality, but it is one of the most important dimensions of his memoir—racism. While Civil War scholars have documented that the overwhelming majority of white Union troops were as racist as their southern counterparts, this fact is often lost on the general public. Less than ten percent of the white northern public harbored abolitionist sentiment by 1860, and many of those individuals would be considered racist by modern standards. Many white Union troops, especially those from the Midwest, did not like African Americans and resisted the idea that they were fighting for emancipation. While it cannot be denied that southern slave holders were fighting to perpetuate the institution, it is equally true that the majority of white Union troops could have cared less about the fate of the slaves. For them, the Union remained their cause. Indeed, as historians of the war have noted, virtually all white Union troops supported the war to save the Union, and if they supported emancipation, it was only as a war aim designed to weaken the South.<sup>3</sup>

Bir's work shows clearly that he and his comrades were products of their society's racial and ethnic biases. In addition to the racism portrayed, Bir mentions the looting by Union forces of Jewish-owned businesses in Cairo, Illinois, and the unwillingness of Union commanders to stop it. Bir himself stole a barrel of eggs while others tossed a hog through the window of a Jewish merchant's shop. Bir even recalled seeing one of his comrades "shoot down" a Jew who would not grant him credit.

Bir's honesty is disturbing yet refreshing. Many post-war accounts were carefully sanitized and self-serving. Since Bir intended for his reminiscences to be read to fellow veterans at reunions, he apparently believed that his audience would be receptive to his positions and experiences. We, of course, do not know how his stories were received or if those present shared similar attitudes. However, Bir's account should

---

<sup>3</sup>For a good analysis of the attitude of Northern white troops toward African Americans, slavery, and emancipation, see the following: McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 56-69; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 117-30; Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 109-23; Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers*, 14-15, 41-42, 91, 104, 119, 121-23, 126-31, 197-98.

find a responsive audience among modern students of the war. The memoir offers social, regional, and Civil War historians a valuable primary source and takes the general public on a fascinating journey into the past as seen through the eyes of someone who was there. The author's candid portrayal of his experiences from diarrhea to watching men die offers us a chance to see what Walt Whitman lamented would never get into the books—the real war.<sup>4</sup>



---

<sup>4</sup>Gay Wilson Allen and Sculley Bradley, eds., *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, 2 vols., *Prose Works 1892: Specimen Days* (New York, 1963), 115-18.