

An Indiana Volunteer Advises His Neighbors

*Edited by Charles G. Talbert**

The Thirty-first Indiana Volunteer Infantry was mustered into service for three years at Terre Haute on September 15, 1861. After active participation in the Battle of Shiloh, the Thirty-first was assigned to the Fourth Division of the Army of the Ohio, under the command of General William Nelson, and took part in the siege of Corinth. It moved with Buell's army into Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Between December 31, 1862, and January 2, 1863, the Thirty-first saw action at the Battle of Stone River, and on September 19 and 20, 1863, at the Battle of Chickamauga. At the time the letter below was written, the Thirty-first was commanded by Colonel John T. Smith, and was in the First Brigade of the Second Division of the Twenty-first Corps. The corps commander was Major General Thomas L. Crittenden, the division commander was Major General John M. Palmer, and the brigade commander was Brigadier General Charles Cruft. On January 1, 1864, the regiment re-enlisted as a veteran organization and afterwards participated in the Atlanta campaign and the Battle of Nashville. The regiment was mustered out on December 8, 1865.¹

Sergeant James K. Wells was mustered into Company B, composed of men from Owen County, on September 20, 1861. On January 8, 1863, he was commissioned second lieutenant. He resigned from the army September 30, 1864.²

The actual strength and role of the Copperheads in Indiana remains a moot question.³ Copperheads were nearly

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¹ *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana* (8 vols., Indianapolis, 1865-1869), II (1865), 309-310; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (70 vols., Washington, 1880-1901), Series 1, XXIII (1889), 411-415.

² *Report of the Adjutant General*, II, 304.

³ For information on the Copperhead movement in Indiana, see Mayo Fesler, "Secret Political Societies in the North during the Civil War," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XIV (1918), 183-286.

all Democrats, but what proportion of Democrats were Copperheads? How and to what degree were the Copperheads disloyal? To what extent did Republicans exaggerate the Copperhead menace to justify possibly arbitrary and irregular acts of Governor Oliver P. Morton? To what extent did the Democrats support and encourage the Copperheads to weaken or embarrass the Republicans?

Sergeant Wells, writing from Tennessee in April of 1863, warned the Copperheads in his home community of the folly and traitorous nature of their views and activities. The Copperhead movement was then gaining momentum but Wells predicted ultimate success for the glorious Union and, though apparently uncertain about the ultimate impact of emancipation, he considered talk of Negro immigration to and Negro equality in Indiana as disruptive propaganda. Sergeant Wells' letter illustrates the understandingly bitter feelings of loyal soldiers at the front toward the Copperheads, but it is not of much help regarding their actual strength and role in Indiana during the war.

Camp on Cripple Creek Tenn, April 16th 1863.

To the Citizens of Middletown Owen Co. Ind.

Permit me to appeal to you, who has spent twelve years of his life with you I have enjoyed the society of many of you and have as much interest for you as any man can have. But I am sorry to hear by letters sent to the soldiers and by newspapers that are read in camp that there is some in Jefferson township who are endeavoring to form secret lodges called the Knights of the Golden Circle for the purpose of protecting deserters that they have persuaded to leave the federal army. To all such let me ask them a question. what do you expect to gain by your wild and mad career. I would advise you to look back to the beginning of this wicked rebellion. You were made believe by the southern leaders and a few demagogues of the north that the United States government intended to subjugate the south and establish negro equality in the north. For these reasons you were made to believe that the south had a just right to secede and form a Southern Confederacy. You were told that they had a right under the Constitution of the United States to secede peaceably if they wish to do so and that, that should be no reason for bringing on a war with the

United States. And you were made to believe that one southern man could whip five northern yankies as traitors called us. And some of you said that England and France would acknowledge the independence of the south and if their aid were needed they would aid the south and break the blockade. You thought that cotton was king and the south immensely rich and that they could wage war with the United States and the Southern Confederacy would soon be a great nation and Jeff Davis a great man while the north would become verry poor and Abe. Lincoln verry unpopular, and consequently the United States would be obliged to acknowledge the independence of the confederate states. And since the rebellion began you have been sympathiseing with the rebels in the south and trying to cripple the efforts of the armies that were trying to put down rebellion. You have threatened to destroy the property of union soldiers while they were in the army fighting to protect you and your property as well as their own. Now this war has been carried on nearly two years, and I ask you has the southern leaders fullfilled one promise they made to their soldiers. I answer they have not and the Confederate army is growing weaker every day while the Federal army is growing stronger and the soldiers in the Federal army are more revived in the work of their country than they ever were before. They have resolved to stand by the Union and fight for the Star Spangled bannor till again it shall wave over every state that belonged to the Union and over the heads of every traitor both south and north. The traitors at home may say what they please about the Presidents Proclimation. if we dont like it we will say but little about it but we will never forsake the Union as long as the Presidents Proclimation is in favor of weakening the rebellion.⁴ We are in for saveing our once glorious Union if it costs the lives and blood of every rebel in the south and if that wont do we will about face and hang and kill every butternut and copperhead in the north. I had rather kill a rebel at home any time than kill a man that will fight face to face. The copperheads must not talk about burning and stealing the property of the soldiers that are in the union army for there is a day when they will repent of it. this war will not last allways and we are shure

⁴ The writer seems to have recognized the Emancipation Proclamation as a military and diplomatic weapon.

to come out conqueror. Now I want to ask you if negroe equality is established in Indiana yet. Some of you tried to make the soldiers wives believe that their husbands were fighting to free the slaves and send them into Indiana by the 1st of April. I want some of you smart educated Knights of the Golden Circle to let me know when you see the first squad of negroes coming from the south to become citizens in Owen county. You big able bodied copperheads that are so afraid of the south being wronged out of their rights why dont you come down south and join the rebels and help them fight for their rights. They have acknowledged that one man of theirs cant whip five of ours and they say their friends in the north have been talking long and loud what they loud to do but had done nothing yet only some low degraded crime which caused them to be taken by some of the blue jackets to Indianapolis and there be put in jail. I think so too. You have done the wind work but that is all. You are not powerful enough to effect any thing in the south and you havent got brains enough for Govenor Morton so I dont know what you are good for unless it is to drink rotgut whisky eat rotten eggs and stand on a rotten platform till it sinks deeper than a stone in the ocean and twice as hard to find. There are some of the democrats that voted with you at the Presidential election that are battling for their country while you are trying to stab them in the back. The seceded states are now cut in two and the rebels can no longer hope to gain their independence and you with the rebels have been deceived about England and France aiding to gain the independence of the Southern Confederacy therefore I think you had better lay low for if you dont it will only be the worse for you. It is a scandle and a shame for you and your children and relation and friends the way you have conducted yourselves since this rebellion broke out. You shurely have been crazy or drunk to think that the Southern Confederacy could whip the United States. for they cant do it and you to help them so the longer you continue in your corruptness the worse it will be for you then why will you not stop your lowlifed meanness and save yourselves. How barborous it is to continue the way you have been doing, when you can accomplish nothing only your own destruction and the destruction of your wives and daughters your fathers and mothers your

brothers and sisters and relations. There are some of you who still believe the United States Government will free the negroes and turn them loose among you. But let us examine that point. For my part I have no uneasiness about that if the rebels would lay down their arms and come back into the Union. The majority of the union soldiers are in favor of restoring the Union and the Constitution if it frees every slave in the south, then they will vote for men that are in favor of sending the negroe where he belongs or as near there as he can be got. You know as well as I do that the rebels have had a chance to save their slaves and property too by coming back to the Union in due time but they did not so who is to blame but themselves. They was not willing to any compromise nor nothing else only their independence that they will never get. It is now plain that they will have to return to the Union and the sooner the better for them. The rebellion would soon end if it was not for the leaders. They know that they are whiped and are only holding the southern troops between them and us to save their own necks till they have an opportunity to get a way. The rebels are sick enough in this section of the country. Instead of starving the Federals they have starved themselves. Now as I am about to conclude and dont know wheather I will ever see any of you or not I desire that you honor your government the government that has allways blessed you and the Union that you have always been protected in and the union that you have enjoyed all your happiness in.

Yours truly

J.K. Wells, Co. B.
31st Ind vols.