

The Many Curiosities Of Webb Garrison

Morgan Knull

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Knull, Morgan (2000) "The Many Curiosities Of Webb Garrison," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss3/28>

Editorial

THE MANY CURIOSITIES OF WEBB GARRISON

Knull, Morgan

Summer 2000

Although a half-century separated us in age, when I was introduced to Webb Garrison, he remained very much in his prime. The author of 50 books, six alone in the past year, his annual output exceeded what some writers produce in a lifetime. When he died in July, at age 81, he still was going steady, having retired to Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, to become, in the words of one book critic, "a virtual one-man Civil War publishing house."

I never met Webb, but we soon were on a first-name basis. "I hardly ever use a title of any sort," he declared. Ours was, as editorial relationships often are, an association conducted by letter, phone, and the occasional email. We spoke for the final time in June, when I pitched to him the idea of reviewing a book on the 1864 Atlanta campaign, a review that would have appeared in this issue.

As a graduate student in sociology and divinity at Emory, Webb was introduced to the work of Bell Wiley, the historian whose *Johnny Reb* and *Billy Yank* books influenced a rising generation of historians, Webb among them. It may not have taken much convincing; his birthplace was some 30 miles east of Atlanta. Escaping the wrath of General William T. Sherman's March to the Sea, his hometown of Covington was visited in July 1864 by Union cavalry general Kenner Garrard, who burned public facilities and terrorized the civilians. The raid left a deep impression on his grandmother, who passed lore about it down to Webb. "Always dressed entirely in black, she was mentally and physically vigorous at age ninety-two," Webb wrote of her. "Over and over, she exulted in telling a small boy how she succeeded in burying 'a side of bacon' so skillfully that marauding Yankees did not find it."

His books were outgrowths of a lifelong curiosity about nearly ever subject. They bore popular titles--a representative sample might include *Amazing Women of the Civil War*, *Creative Minds in Desperate Times*, *Strange Facts About the Bible*, and *Love, Lust, and Longing in the White House*--and together they sold more than 700,000 copies. Most consisted of anecdotes and sketches, and for a

very practical reason. For decades, Webb squirreled away notes and clippings whenever he read something new. Soon he had assembled a trove filled with "tens of thousands of pages" that served as the source material for his books on history, etymology, science, religion, and other topics.

In at least two respects, Webb anticipated developments in the publishing industry. He recognized the diminished attention span of readers today, and, like any great preacher, he resolved to find a way to connect with them. The result was books filled with short chapters, snappy writing, and memorable details. Secondly, he used oral history as a source, as might any southern boy who first learned about the Civil War at his grandmother's knee. Despite these innovations, Webb should not be mistaken for a Leveller. "Methods, though important in their own right, must remain subsidiary to principles," he maintained. "There can be no real eloquence without great ideas."

In *Atlanta and the War*, Webb concludes with a moving chapter about the postwar rebuilding of the city, especially how former Confederates worked alongside Yankee industrialists to attract new investment and factories. He writes that the highlight of the 1881 International Cotton Exposition was Atlanta's decision to invite Sherman to deliver remarks: "Alone among the cities of the United States, Atlanta transformed its conqueror into a lauded public figure, then welcomed him as though he were a native son." Like the generous spirit exemplified by Atlanta, Webb Garrison's lifelong passion for history transcended the need either to glorify or to disown the past.