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Interview

GALVANIZED YANKEES ON THE UPPER MISSOURI: THE FACE OF LOYALTY

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Michele Tucker Butts is an associate professor of history at Austin Peay State University, where she teaches the history of the American West and Native American history. She has authored several articles and has contributed to both The Encyclopedia of the Great Plains and the Encyclopedia of the War of 1812. A native southerner, Dr. Butts received her B.A. and M.A. from A.P.S.U., and her Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico. Interview with Michele Tucker Butts

Interviewed by Leah Wood Jewett

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): *When many people hear the term galvanized Yankee, they assume that this referred to a Confederate prisoner who was given little choice but to become a Union soldier. But in your book you describe instances where soldiers opted to fight for the U.S. rather than return home. To what do you attribute such a decision? What other options were available to Confederate POWs?*

Michele Tucker Butts (MTB): All Galvanized Yankees were given the choice between military service or continued imprisonment for the duration of the war. The First U.S. Volunteer Infantry were unique in many ways. Being the first regiment organized although individual prisoners had been enlisted into Union service for over a year on the sly the First U.S. Volunteers had several choices: take the oath of allegiance and be released to stay within Union lines; take the oath and be released to work on government works for the duration of the war; take the oath and enlist in U.S. service (ie., some joined the Navy); or remain in prison and wait for exchange or for the end of the war. Every prisoner in Camp Hoffman, better known as Point Lookout Prison, in January and February 1864 chose one of those four options. Incidentally, at that time the

offer was to fight on the frontlines in Virginia and North Carolina (the conditions under which the other regiments were recruited are not well documented). Most chose the latter, but my book explores possible reasons for over one thousand men choosing to enlist in the First U.S. Volunteer Infantry Regiment. It appears that most men from Tennessee and North Carolina, who made up the largest single segment of the regiment, were from Unionist counties who had opposed secession in 1860-61.

CWBR: What was the driving force behind converting Confederate prisoners to federal troops?

MTB: With only one out of every five draftees actually reaching the frontlines as the death toll skyrocketed in the eastern theatre, the Union was in desperate need of soldiers. With the Sioux attacking boats on the Missouri and Native raids on the overland trails in the West, President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton were forced to order mid-western and western state volunteer regiments to western posts instead of Virginia. Local draft officials across the North begged to recruit from the nearby prisons to meet their quotas.

CWBR: What did the Northern public think initially about these efforts?

MTB: Because the recruiting was done very quietly, few northern civilians were even aware of the practice. Local draft officials begged for it, and were thrilled when the President allowed it. Unfortunately, other Union troops generally did not respect the Galvanized Yankees and gave them much grief.

CWBR: Galvanized units were tried first in battle against former comrades before being sent West. Have you come across any letters/diaries from anyone who describes such an encounter?

MTB: No, I have not as of yet. Their pension files generally discuss reasons for their enlistment or their post-war lives.

CWBR: You refer to the interaction between various Native American tribes and the 1st U. S. Volunteer Infantry Regiment as a harbinger of things to come regarding multiculturalism in America. Can you elaborate on that?

MTB: Whereas fur traders, who had lived among Native people for years, adapted themselves and their business to Native cultures, U.S. Army personnel

were among the first to enter the West expecting Native people to adapt to their way of doing things. In areas such as the Upper Missouri, this created a golden opportunity for Euro-Americans and Native Americans to size each other up and develop mutual understanding. Unfortunately, the adversarial relationship rapidly developed instead due to intransigence on both sides. Despite this fact, a few individuals, like Two Bears of the Yanktonai, could foresee the necessity of establishing cordial relations with the newcomers and were quite willing to compromise in order to preserve their people. If Native Americans and U.S. soldiers could have established friendly relations on the Upper Missouri, as they did briefly in the Southwest — until lawless civilians and citizen soldiers destroyed it — they could have established a precedent. This could have become a model for peaceful western development and peaceful coexistence among Hispanics in the Southwest, European immigrants in Eastern cities, and Asian immigrants on the West Coast. Mutual respect and understanding were a possibility, but the federal government again failed to communicate effectively and to impose its ideals upon the poorly educated public. Without the support and commitment of the federal government — which at the moment was terrified of losing a single Euro-American vote back East and was grappling with Reconstruction in the South — Native Americans, Hispanics, Europeans, and Asians were left to the merciless prejudice and self-interest of Euro-American civilians, who believed that they were fulfilling their Manifest Destiny.

CWBR: Did most galvanized units have similar experiences in the West?

MTB: Yes, the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth U.S. Volunteer Infantry Regiments were all sent west to guard the overland routes and garrison western forts as other Union volunteers were mustering out of service. Few suffered as greatly from harsh weather and disease as the First did, although the others also lost men to wounds and death during Native raids. Their garrison experiences varied from short stays at isolated stations to months spent at a major post. None served as long as the First U.S. Volunteers, who began their service in April 1864 and mustered out in November 1865.

CWBR: What kind of reception did galvanized Yankees receive when they returned home? Were these men given federal pensions after the war?

MTB: Sadly, they were not welcomed home by their former Confederate neighbors. Many moved from place to place in the Upper South until moving permanently to the Middle Border or western states. Those who remained in the

South generally settled in Unionist areas, near former comrades, where they formed an informal veterans' network. They served as each other's references when they applied for pensions. Although they were initially denied pensions according to the conditions of their enlistment, Congress passed new legislation in 1890, which included them. As a result, the surviving members of the First U.S. Volunteers and their widows applied for and received benefits from that time until their deaths. Their surviving dependents received benefits well into the Twentieth Century.

CWBR: How has this phenomenon been portrayed in film and literature?

MTB: My interest in this subject began with John Ford's Cavalry Trilogy, in which he depicted several characters who were former Confederate soldiers. *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* specifically inspired me to find out who these men were and why they would be willing to wear Federal Blue. In Ford's films, former Confederate officers and enlisted men were serving as enlisted U.S. soldiers, some under assumed names. All were portrayed as fine, gallant, patriotic soldiers, and their former service seemed to be respected by their Federal comrades and commanding officers. In reality, none of the First U.S. Volunteers, as far as I have been able to learn, remained in Federal service after mustered out of their regiment. Those who remained in the West generally chose to head for the mining regions. Because the historical records were so extensive, I have not had time to examine literature sources on Confederate prisoners of war or Galvanized Yankees. That study would certainly prove to be fascinating.

CWBR: What is the larger legacy of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Infantry Regiment and galvanized Yankees in general?

MTB: As Captain Enoch Adams said at the time, they were the first fruits of a reunited nation. They present a unique snapshot of how northerners and southerners would relate to each other for the rest of the century. They worked together well along lines of common interest û mutual defense, shelter, food production, etc. However, when the perception developed that their personal interests were being sacrificed to serve Northern ambitions, this loyalty broke down. Nevertheless, their willingness to rejoin the Union on the condition of mutual respect was an important sign that genuine reconciliation was possible between northerners and southerners. Galvanized Yankees who remained in the South formed Unionist conclaves. Sadly, federal Reconstruction policies failed to create an atmosphere of mutual respect within the nation as a whole. This

contributed to the South's unwillingness to capitulate to what they perceived as unjustified Northern cultural dominance.