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Review

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Notes from a Louisiana Infantryman

Gary and Marilyn Joiner and Clifton D. Cardin have rescued this monumental diary from almost certain obscurity and, fortunately for students of the Civil War era, have preserved a revealing account of life among the soldiers and citizens as it unfolded in the remote northern section of Louisiana. Confederate infantryman Private William Henry King kept a meticulous account of his life in the Confederate army, from the beginning to the end of the war. Or, to quote one of the many Latin phrases he usedù"*ab initia ad finem.*"

King was born July 28, 1828, in Madison County, Alabama, the second of ten children. The family moved to Bossier Parish, Louisiana in the 1850s, settling just south of Plain Dealing. He enlisted in Monroe, Louisiana, April 30, 1862. His somewhat sickly nature helped to make his military career difficult. In fact, the reader may sometimes wonder if King suffered from hypochondria. He seems to have run the gamut of every illness that befell soldiers during the war. The remedies and treatments he underwent reveal much about the medical practices of his day and make interesting reading. King himself sometimes wondered if the treatment he received was worse than the cure. In fact, one medical doctor, probably at his wits end for treatments, encouraged King to take a medical discharge. But he doggedly hung on.

Sicknesses and diseases ran rampant in the military service. King explains in the journal how young men, once accustomed to sleeping in relative luxury and comfort were suddenly thrust into the rigors of outdoor living, which made them prone to myriad diseases and maladies that often ended in death. Indeed, King recounts the death of many of his comrades who died from illnesses easily cured

today. In doing so, he reminds the reader that many Civil War soldiers died not from battlefield wounds, but from disease.

King harbored a deep resentment for officers, which may have stemmed from a deep rooted inferiority complex. He felt that the officers were better fed and received an inordinate amount of perks which were denied to the enlisted men. He often cited the famous battle cry of the draft riots of New York: A rich man's war and a poor man's fight! King's journal reveals his problems with accepting authority, which he bitterly resisted to the end. Like most white southerners of that period, he possessed a strong, stubborn sense of independent manhood and honor. He found it especially intolerable submitting to anyone he felt inferior to his intellect and ability.

King never experienced combat, though he was captured while convalescing in south Louisiana and imprisoned in New Orleans for a short duration, until properly exchanged. During his imprisonment he had an enlightening exchange of ideas with one of his Union captors. In discussing the issue of emancipation, the Yankee made it perfectly clear to King that he would not fight if it meant emancipating the slaves; that they were under the belief that the slaves would remain free only until the end of the war, at which time they would be returned to their rightful owners. Although King did not record his response to the Yankee's remark, it is obvious from his writings that he was sensitive to the plight of the African-American. For instance, he felt that the order issued by the Louisiana governor authorizing the conscription of the free black was hypocritical; he personally believed, however, that black men would make better regular soldiers than white men.

After being paroled, King slowly made his way back to north Louisiana. He was then transferred from the 28th Infantry Regiment, Louisiana Volunteers to the 4th Engineer Regiment of Pontooneers, a unit charged with hauling and installing pontoon bridges over rivers. It proved to be a backbreaking ordeal for King in which he described the misery attendant with the jobùassisting the mules in pushing and pulling the awkward, heavy wagons through miles of muddy roads.

King describes in great detail the battle of Mansfield, Louisiana, in which Confederate General Richard Taylor defeated Union General Nathaniel P. Banks' grand army, thereby thwarting the Federal invasion of Texas through Shreveport. King gives a vivid account of the wanton destruction left in the wake of the

Union army as they retreated southward. King always seemed to be just on the fringes of battles, never having actually engaged in combat himself. He was close enough at times to hear the artillery and see smoke from the gunboats, but for the most part, he always seemed ill during his tenure. King would have viewed the destruction and ruins left in the wake of the retreating Federals in the course of his duties on guard duty and as a pontonier with the wagon-borne portable pontoon bridges.

King readily takes sides with his boss, General Edmund Kirby Smith after the Battle of Mansfield, which engendered a bitter feud between Smith and Taylor. Taylor always felt that Smith cheated him of victory over the routed Federals when the general split his forces, sending half up to intercept the Union thrust coming down form Little Rock, Arkansas. The result was that Taylor asked for and received a transfer, as well as a promotion, against Smith's wishes. It was a bitter feud that Taylor took to the grave. As the editors point out, most of Taylor's contemporaries, and historians today, tend to side with Taylor in this matter.

The editors have succeeded at placing King's journal in historical context, especially through their meticulous explanatory footnotes. King filled his journal with rumors and speculation, which the editors carefully sort out, and in some cases, rebut. In fact, the footnotes tell more about the actual Civil War than King's narrative.

Despite bitter disillusionment with the Confederate conduct of the war, including the flagrant graft that he witnessed, King remained loyal to the cause until the very end. And, despite his delicate health, the soldier lived to be 95 years old. The editors have preserved a valuable and unique journal of the Civil War experience.

William A. Spedale, author and historian, is a native Baton Rougeon with a lifelong interest in the American Civil War and World War II. Among his publications are The Battle of Baton Rouge, 1862, Where Bugles Called and Rifles Gleamed: Port Hudson Yesterday and Today, *and* Heroes of Harding Field.