

Young, old came to South's defense

■ They often were only resistance to Gen. Sherman's troops.

When Gen. William T. Sherman's federal troops burned Columbia and headed north in late February 1865, the towns along his path had no defense other than that offered by old men and young boys. Able-bodied men, almost to a man, were in Confederate service, miles away from their families.

Yorkville had a company made up of men older than 40 ready to put up resistance, but Union troops did not go in that direction. Chesterville, the juncture of three railroads, feared that it would be struck, but the federal forces veered to the east, and Chester District was spared.

Lancaster District was not so fortunate. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick's cavalry entered Lancasterville and attempted to burn both the courthouse and the jail. But before they could accomplish that mission, Gen. Joe Wheeler's Confederates drove them away. Still, many courthouse papers (notably the wills and estate records) were lost. In the countryside, many plantation homes were burned or ransacked.

At the time, Lancaster District had a home guard that had been organized as Company I, 3rd Regt. State Troops, headed by Capt. James Caskey and four lieutenants. The officers were all older men, but the company was known as "A Company of 16 Year Old Boys." Company I had more than 150 privates when it was ordered to rendezvous in early September 1864 at Hamburg (next to present-day North Augusta, on the Savannah river).

In 1912, Samuel Belk, then living in Monroe, N.C., who had been



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one of the 16-year-olds of Company I, wrote an account of an adventure he called "Scrimmage in Lancaster," for the Confederate Veteran, a popular magazine of the day.

Belk said that when Kilpatrick's cavalry came through, he was out on patrol when the Federals reached Belk's "humble log cabin home." The Federal troops rifled the Belk smokehouses and hung the captured smoked hams on their saddles. (While Belk described the marauders as Federal troops, they may actually have been undisciplined Union deserters, or others, either Federal or Confederate, who masqueraded as soldiers and terrorized civilians in order to steal any valuables they could find.)

Just as the Federals were ready to leave, Wheeler's cavalry came in pursuit. The "robbers cut the meat loose and tried to escape with Wheeler's men close behind." One of the Union men, a soldier named Leroy Vanconey, was killed. He was identified by letters from Ohio he had in his pockets.

Two other Union men known as Smith and Williams were wounded and captured by the Confederates. Wheeler's men went to the Belk log cabin and asked Mrs. Belk and her daughter to take care of the

men, so that they could be picked up later.

The two women dressed the wounds. They found that Williams could walk. Mrs. Belk and her daughter got the sheet that was used to carry Smith to their cabin. The next day Federal officers sent an ambulance for the two wounded men. The creek was high, and they couldn't cross. So they used a foot log to take the men to the ambulance. Smith died that night.

Belk wrote that the 21-year-old Vanconey was buried on the Belk home place.

Hannah Jan Belk had an adventure about the same time as the scrimmage at the Belk smokehouse. As the Union soldiers came up the road toward her home, her uncle, Sam Belk, "handed her a long black stocking full of gold coins and told her to hide them; but Yankees were already approaching the picket fence where she was standing, so she dropped it down beside the fence post, and it remained there for the two weeks the soldiers camped in their yard."

Another Belk from Lancaster District, Abel Nelson Washington Belk, lost his life when he was captured by some Federals who believed he had a store of hidden gold. Trying to force Belk to talk, they submerged him in Gill's Creek. Belk drowned. He was the father of William Henry and John Montgomery Belk, the founders of the Belk department stores.

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