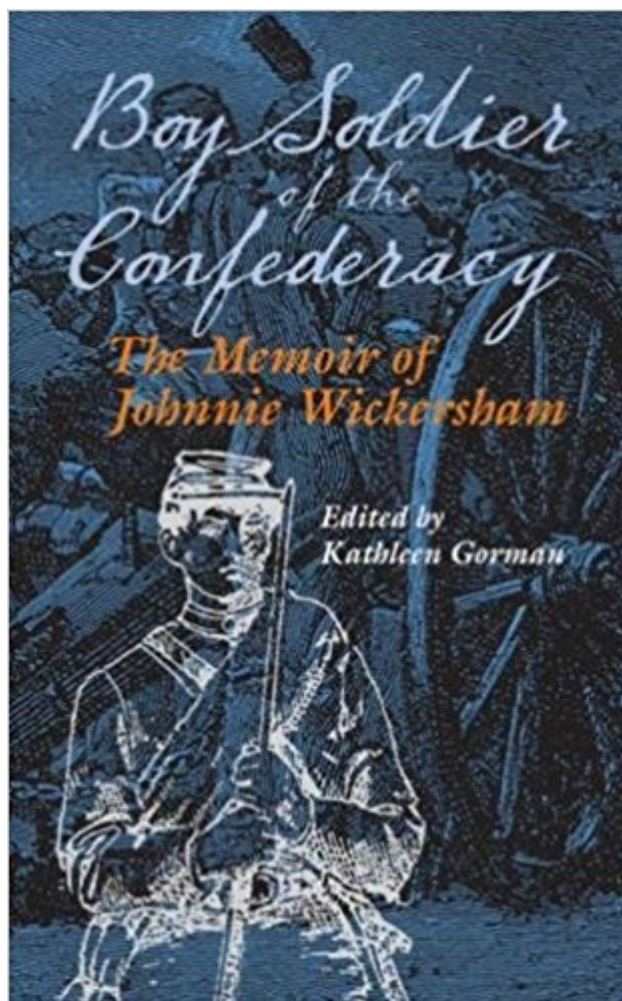


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Boy Soldier Of The Confederacy: The Memoir Of Johnnie Wickersham



Synopsis

Johnnie Wickersham was fourteen when he ran away from his Missouri home to fight for the Confederacy. Fifty years after the war, he wrote his memoir at the request of family and friends and distributed it privately in 1915. *Boy Soldier of the Confederacy: The Memoir of Johnnie Wickersham* offers not only a rare look into the Civil War through the eyes of a child but also a coming-of-age story. Edited by Kathleen Gorman, the volume presents a new introduction and annotations that explain how the war was glorified over time, the harsh realities suppressed in the nation's collective memory. Gorman describes a man who nostalgically remembers the boy he once was. She maintains that the older Wickersham who put pen to paper decades later likely glorified and embellished the experience, accepting a polished interpretation of his own past. Wickersham recounts that during his first skirmish he was "wild with the ecstasy of it all" and notes that he was "too young to appreciate the danger." The memoir traces his participation in an October 1861 Confederate charge against Springfield, Missouri; his fight at the battle of Pea Ridge in March 1862; his stay at a plantation he calls Fairyland; and the battle of Corinth. The volume details Wickersham's assignment as an orderly for General Sterling Price, his capture at Vicksburg in 1863, his parole, and later his service with General John Bell Hood for the 1864 fighting around Atlanta. Wickersham also describes the Confederate surrender in New Orleans, the reconciliation of the North and the South, and his own return and reunification with his family. While Gorman's incisive introduction and annotations allow readers to consider how memories can be affected by the passage of time, Wickersham's boy-turned-soldier tale offers readers an engaging narrative, detailing the perceptions of a child on the cusp of adulthood during a turbulent period in our nation's history.

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Customer Reviews

"We Fought Like Wild Animals with Bulldog Tenacity" Kathleen Gorman has edited the autobiographical account of Johnnie Wickersham, a youthful fifteen-year old Confederate enlistee. Gorman, an associate professor of history at Minnesota State University, Mankato, presents an absorbing narrative. Her aim is to weave fact with fiction related to the South's "Lost Cause" myth: "fact ... tells us of the Civil War experience for the average young Confederate," while the "fiction [speaks] of the need for veterans on a losing side to maintain the honor of their cause" (p. ix). Wickersham wrote his memoir in 1915, fifty years after the succession of hostilities and only one year into the "Great War" that engulfed forty-three nations. It was published in 1918 with the stated purpose of recounting his service to the Missouri State Guard and the greater Confederacy for his grandson Curtis. Why, though, did he wait until 1915? Gary Gallagher and Alan Nolan, in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, write that "the Lost Cause is ... an American legend. [T]he legends tells us that the war was a mawkish and essentially heroic and romantic melodrama, an honorable sectional duel, a time of martial glory on both sides, and triumphant nationalism." They cite recent works on the "Lost Cause Myth" and suggest that "the purpose of the legend was to foster a heroic image of secession and the war so that the Confederates would have salvaged at least their honor from the all-encompassing defeat." [1] Gallagher's and Nolan's characterization of the Civil War as a "melodrama" and "duel," a time of "glory" and "nationalism," might equally apply to the Great War. Wickersham's memoir reflects motives of justification and honor. The question of why he was moved to write fifty years after his service may be partially answered by the fact that the Great War represented one of the greatest military conflicts since the American Civil War; in a reflective mood at age 69, Wickersham apparently felt that he should provide for family members an account of his activities related to America's last great conflict. As Gorman writes, though the memoir is not always accurate regarding the historical events, the work enabled "veterans on a losing side to maintain the honor of their cause" (p. ix). Wickersham was born in Kentucky in 1846. The Wickersham family migrated from Kentucky to Lebanon, Missouri with two slaves in 1857. The year 1857 was noted for the famous U.S. Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sanford* and the heightened bloodshed known as "Bleeding Kansas." Lebanon is located in the Ozarks of south central Missouri, between

Springfield and Jefferson City, and its residents fought for both the Union and the Confederacy. The town was occupied on numerous occasions by both sides, but more often with Federal troops protecting the "Wire Road" (telegraph line) between St. Louis and Springfield. The famous "Wire Road" occupied an important geographical and topographical boundary during the Battle of Wilson Creek in 1861. Questions of historical accuracy and the reliability of first-hand accounts need to be addressed immediately for readers who are not historians. Wickersham describes events during the war that touched his daily life as a young boy on his way to becoming a young man, including horse-racing, receiving his uniform, his first scouting assignment, his first kiss, being alone on a battlefield, hearing "Dixie" for the first time, imprisonment, and capturing prisoners. He also describes his participation in some of the Civil War's major engagements: Wilson Creek [Oak Hill] (August 1861), Pea Ridge [Elkhorn Tavern] (March 1862), Shiloh [Pittsburg Landing] (April 1862), Vicksburg (May-July 1863), Kennesaw Mountain (June 1864), Atlanta (July 1864), and the Savannah Campaign (November-December 1864). Wickersham does not mention receiving notification, in the summer of 1863, of Union General Thomas Ewing's infamous "General Order No. 11" which expelled residents of the rural western Missouri counties of Bates, Cass, Jackson, and Vernon. The order evacuated all residents, no matter Union or Confederate, from these counties. Shortly following the evacuations, Union troops burned, in a scorched-earth policy, all buildings, crops, and personal property remaining in those counties. Gorman notes up front that Wickersham's descriptions of events may be suspect with respect to accuracy. As editor, she was not responsible for correcting textual inaccuracies and she should be commended for maintaining the memoir's original text. She has corrected, though, language that may be unfamiliar to the modern reader. The inclusion of more maps (e.g., the battles of Wilson Creek or Pea Ridge) and photographs of major participants (e.g., Confederate general Sterling Price or Union general Nathaniel Lyon) would have assisted the Civil War historian and general reader in placing locations and names alongside the Wickersham text. Gorman divides the memoir into six well-organized chapters and supplies historical context "to provide a more structured narrative flow" (p. xiii). Her introduction provides excellent background on Wickersham's family and times in Missouri and includes a map indicating some cities and major battles in proximity to Lebanon. Her notes are extremely descriptive and contain additional information for the reader. Gorman writes that "the memoir is a picaresque tale, an old man remembering the boy he once was; the boy forever lost to four years of bloody warfare and fifty years of seeing those four years transformed into something magical and mystical" (p. xix). The memoir should be considered by both historians and general readers as an example of the common soldier's experience. Historian William C. Davis has written

that "virtually all wars have their winners and losers. To the vanquished the manner of being beaten may pose more peril than defeat itself, for the character of every peace is shaped by the close of hostilities that gave it birth. Never is this more the case than in a civil war." [2] Wickersham describes the final surrender thus: "Our eyes involuntarily turned in the direction of that beloved battle flag which had never known dishonor or disgrace, and we thought of the many, many heroes who had died under it, and with one accord we struggled to obtain a scrap of it. The war was over, and we had lost" (pp. 131-132). Wickersham's scrap of flag represented the immediate conclusion of military hostilities; his memoir represents the personal conclusion of his "Lost Cause" memories. Notes [1]. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 12, 13-14. [2]. William C. Davis, *An Honorable Defeat: The Last Days of the Confederate Government* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001), xiii. (Timothy C. Westcott H-NET BOOK REVIEW H-CIV WAR 2007-10-01)

Kathleen Gorman is an associate professor of history at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She has published in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, written a chapter for *Before the New Deal: Social Welfare in the South, 1830-1930*, and contributed to *Editing Documents and Texts: An Annotated Bibliography*.

Johnnie left for the war at age fourteen. The war exploded around him without warning in his first experience in combat and when it was over, he reported to General Price to describe the affair, and was commissioned a captain. It was decades after the war that he wrote his memoirs for the benefit of his grandson. A fascinating record of the Civil War by one who was but a teenager at the time.

It is interesting to read memoirs such as these and to gain insights from our country's past. This is especially true when it is about a youth growing up during war time, and his becoming a soldier. Thank you for sharing this story with us as I really enjoyed it. I do agree that it can be hard to know when or why someone embellishes the fact. It is very likely the author is right about adjusting the truth, but we really don't know, unless an obvious lie. My Wickersham ancestors pioneered, settled, and lived just a short distance across the border of Missouri (in Yellville Arkansas,) where young Johnny speaks of joining the Confederate Army. As a historian and family researcher, I can vouch for the fact that family lore can get a bit strange. . Despite this, I want to also share that I know that as hard as the military tried to keep good records, it just did not always happen. I have had similar

problems finding individuals i knew had fought in the Civil War. Many men fought, who are no on rolls as well. Why and how this happened I can not say, but I have seen this on several occasions. ad sometimes i find them later ,once even under a different name. I have read stories from journals, letters, and by journalists about my family that relate amazing stories that are bit hard to believe. One such story about my ancestor Daniel Boone Wickersham. this happened during the Civil War, and how he was taken from his home in the middle of the night by Jay Hawkers, who wanted his money. When he would not tell them where his wealth was stashed, they hung him. Amazingly, he did not die. They ended up lynching him three times with no success. They then took his wife, Betsy Dozier Wickersham and hung her with a rope dangling her over a fire, scorching the hem of her dress and severly burning her feet. She did not tell them that she had confederate bills in the hem of her dress which were getting singed. Old Daniel, tried to rescue her and one of the Jay Hawkers shot him. Sometime after finding this story in a small publication at a Chester PA library, I visited my elderly aunt in CA . while growing up in a poor farming family, her father had often told of his family back in AR, including the story about how grandma Besty had difficulty walking due to her badly burned feet during the Civil War by Bushwhackers. These ruthless men committed many horrific murders that are difficult to believe someone would do for very little money or spite. Life can be strangely unbelievable especially during war.I would also like to address the Editors question of "why John Wickersham had not written his war memories until later in life? " My uncle fought in the 82nd Airborne during WWII and was in many well known battles. His story is like an amazing book or movie, and I have wondered why he never wrote his memories. i am now trying to hel him with this. First off, when he finally got home he focused on getting back to a normal life, getting a job, dating, falling in love and marrying, raising a family, etc. Life has a way of doing that to all of us and preventing us from doing other things we want. for many it is hard to review and relive those difficult war time events of death and dying. We have a lot more luxuries today.The Editor questions why he did not mention the clearing of and burning the town. John may not have agreed with the burning of the homes and town,or was too embarrassed to admit being a part of such a thing. Also just because the company was in a patellar locations doesn't mean everyone is there doing the same thing. There are various reasons a soldier might be sent off on other duties.A phrase I once read and like, is that, " war is different to each man depending what he sees when looking down the sights of his rifle." This is very true. In the mayhem of war, the senses are heightened, and we find we behave differently than we expected. It is my belief that one should just read the book and try to reserve judgement but know people do sometimes embellished. Even well known people stretch the truth sometimes.

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