

Civil War! A Missing Piece of the Puzzle Northeast Arkansas 1861-1874

Freeman K. Mobley

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Freeman K. Mobley succinctly describes a generation of neighbor-versus-neighbor, Union-versus-Confederate brawling that took place in Northeast Arkansas before, during, and after the Civil War as a “cruel and vicious little war.” Drawing exclusively on primary sources, Mobley brilliantly, vibrantly, and brutally makes his readers see and feel a conflict in which, as one survivor wrote in her diary, so many people “endured so much for nothing.”

Civil War! A Missing Piece of the Puzzle Northeast Arkansas 1861-1874 is not about the grand sweep of great armies clashing in epic combat. Few of the nineteen significant engagements in that oft-forgotten theater of war are described by Mobley. Readers interested in the histories of great battles can find them elsewhere. In Mobley’s book, the Civil War is writ small, told on a personal level by the participants and victims of nearly twenty years of what Mobley calls “a bitter militia war.”

The war in Arkansas, as Mobley puts it, was fought by “mean, obstreperous, and independent” characters, including “some of the most bitter and vicious soldiers ever produced by any war.” Among the most bitter and vicious of these are the likes of the partisan William Quantrell, the aptly named “Bloody Bill” Anderson, and infamous Frank and Jesse James.

There are many other colorful characters, too. Teenage diarists Elvena and Lucretia Maxfield, for example, provide a wealth of factual reportage and emotional musings on the ebb and flow of the war as it crosses back and forth across their town. They and others in Mobley’s book, however, do not neglect the larger-than-life, cantankerous, and often quirkily amusing generals. Most memorable among these are the “fat and lazy” Stirling Price and the “dictatorial” Thomas Hindman.

For the military historian, the author covers marches and counter-marches, foraging expeditions and raids, and skirmishes and a few pitched battles. Most battles are skimmed over but a few, particularly one fight over a small fort and a running cavalry fight, are documented in some detail.

More than any action on the battlefield, this book, originally published in 2005 as *Making Sense of the Civil War in Batesville-Jacksonport and Northeast Arkansas 1861-1874*, is about people. It brings to light the diaries and letters of both the “unhappy soldiers” and the civilians who fought, died, and lived through this very personal war, one that began before the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter in 1861 and continued, at least in Arkansas, until the “last Confederate soldier surrendered” in 1882. That soldier, as Mobley reports, was Jesse James’ brother, Frank.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (October 11, 2011)

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