

Jerry McKelvy's
WAY BACK WHEN
July, 2025

BROTHER AGAINST BROTHER—DIVIDED LOYALTY

The phrase “brother against brother” usually refers to the American Civil War in which families were divided—some loyal to the Union side and others loyal to the Confederate side. There are reported cases of family members fighting against each other in the same battle. I even read of one case in which a soldier captured his brother during a battle as a prisoner of war.

There are a few graves of Civil War soldiers buried in Nevada County who served on the Union side during the war. At Ebenezer Cemetery near Bluff City are the graves of two Civil War soldiers fifteen feet apart. One has a CSA grave marker and the other has a Union grave marker. These men were not related but both lived in the same small community.



Ransom Pickins Plyler was born May 31, 1840 near Lancaster, South Carolina. He served in Co. I of the 12th South Carolina Infantry in 1863 and 1864 and was wounded in his right arm. He married Amanda Knight in 1880 and came to Arkansas in 1894. Except for one year spent in Tennessee and five years in Montgomery County, Arkansas, he made Nevada County his home settling four miles west of Bluff City. He was known as “Uncle Rance”. He was well respected in the community and was known as a kind, loving father, a devoted husband, and a good neighbor. He died April 21, 1917. *(information from his obituary written by his nephew, J. M. Plyler)*



Solomon R. Johnson was born April, 1833 in Georgia to Abner and Jane Johnson. He married Mary Burrell Coggin in Georgia in 1854. Their children were George T., Louis, Solomon Franklin, John Wesley, Matthew Preston, and Martha. Mary died during the birth of Martha. Solomon then married Prudence ??, but they divorced. He married again to Amanda Jones who had some children by George Jones.

Solomon enlisted in Co. H of the 10th Arkansas Cavalry. His regiment was captured at Longview, Arkansas March 29, 1864 and he was taken prisoner and moved to the Union prisoner

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of war camp at Rock Island, Illinois. That camp was on an island in the Mississippi River. It was built in 1863 and consisted of 84 barracks each 100 feet long, 20 feet wide, and 12 feet high. Each barrack could house 120 prisoners making a total of about 10,000 prisoners in the camp. Conditions at this prisoner of war camp were terrible. The first Confederate prisoners arrived in December when the weather was turning cold. Their clothing was not heavy enough for the extreme temperatures which sometimes reached thirty below zero. Some of the guards were trigger-happy and would shoot a prisoner for the least infraction of the rules. Some prisoners were placed in solitary confinement with only bread and water to eat. Some were punished by hanging from their wrists for long periods of time with their feet barely touching the ground. Disease was prevalent due to unsanitary conditions. Raw sewage and kitchen waste was allowed to get into the water supply for the camp causing disease. Many suffered from pneumonia, diarrhea, smallpox, scurvy, and tuberculosis. In the first two months of operation, 600 men died from smallpox. Others died from starvation and exposure with temperatures thirty below zero. It was reported that food was so scarce that some prisoners ate acorns from oak trees. The first men who died were buried at a spot about 400 yards south of the prison wall. Each grave was marked with a wooden marker with the name if known. They soon ran out of space at this burial place, so they developed another cemetery 1000 yards from the prison in a spot with better drainage. They carefully moved the bodies from the first cemetery and re-interred them at the new site. Some of the Union guards also died from smallpox, so they were buried in the same cemetery as the Confederate prisoners. Of the 12,000 men held at Rock Island prison camp, about 2,000 died during the two years the camp was in operation. The Confederacy also had prison camps that were as bad or worse than Rock Island. The one most often mentioned was called Andersonville in Georgia. During the fourteen months of operation, 45,000 Union prisoners were held there and 13,000 of them died from disease, poor sanitation, malnutrition, overcrowding, and exposure. Rock Island prison camp in Illinois was sometimes called “the Andersonville of the North” due to the poor conditions there.

All that is left of the Rock Island prisoner of war camp today is the Confederate cemetery in which 1964 men were buried. Today, it is maintained by the National Park Service. A nice monument erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy has this inscription— “IN MEMORY OF THE CONFEDERATE VETERANS WHO DIED AT THE ROCK ISLAND PRISON CAMP. MAY THEY NEVER BE FORGOTTEN. LET NO MAN ASPERSE THE MEMORY OF OUR SACRED DEAD. THEY WERE MEN WHO DIED FOR A CAUSE THEY BELIEVED WAS WORTH FIGHTING FOR AND MADE THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE.”

By late 1864, the Union army was needing more soldiers and a plan was put into place to get soldiers from those in the prison camp if they would take an oath of loyalty to the Union. Given the poor conditions in the prison camp, many prisoners chose to accept the offer thinking anything was better than spending more time in that terrible prisoner of war camp. Solomon R. Johnson took advantage of the offer and enlisted in the Union army October 11, 1864 in Co. F. of the 3rd U. S. Volunteer Infantry.

So, Solomon R. Johnson has the distinction of serving on both sides during the Civil War, serving the last few months of the war on the Union side. These soldiers who switched sides were given the name “galvanized Yankees” by the Confederates. Galvanized metal changes colors when coated with zinc. These soldiers changed colors from the gray Confederate uniform to the blue Union uniform. Some of these “galvanized Yankee” soldiers were sent to the western frontier

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to protect mail routes and helped to control Indian uprisings which was a problem at that time. I don't know where Solomon Johnson's regiment served those last few months of the war.

After the war, some of those soldiers returned to their homes in the South even though they were often shunned because they had switched sides in the war. Solomon R. Johnson returned home to spend his remaining days on his farm near Bluff City. About thirty years later, "Rance" Plyler and his family moved to the same community. I wonder if "Rance" and "Sol" ever told war stories from their days in the Civil War. Solomon R. Johnson died April 17, 1923. It is ironic that these two men served on opposite sides in the war, lived in the same community after the war, both had wives named Amanda, and they ended up being buried fifteen feet apart in the same cemetery.

Another interesting bit of information—Thomas Franklin Plyer, son of Ransom Pickens Plyler, and his wife lived in a small frame house near Gum Grove. After his death in 1961, the house became vacant and the Bob Johnson family lived in the same house. He was the grandson of Solomon R. Johnson.



James Wesley McKelvy is also buried at Ebenezer. I think he would be my great-great uncle. He was born in 1836, so he was 25 years old when the Civil War began. His older brother, William J. McKelvy, died while being held prisoner at Camp Butler, Illinois and is buried there in the prison cemetery. James Wesley enlisted in Co. B 33rd Arkansas Infantry. He made it through the war and returned home to the Rocky Hill community which was then in Ouachita County.

Four years after the war ended, his mother died in April, 1869. Ten days later, James also died. We don't know the cause, but suspect that both died from some disease. James Wesley was buried at Ebenezer near his parents, but had no grave marker. I used his military record to apply for a government headstone for him in 2000 and we installed it at the cemetery where we think he is buried. We do not have a picture of him.



Elijah McKelvy was James Wesley's first cousin. Their fathers had left their home in South Carolina and headed in different directions as young men. James' father, Jabez McKelvy, went to Georgia for about ten years and then moved on to Arkansas. Elijah's father, William McKelvy, decided to seek his fortune in Tennessee and later moved on to southeast Missouri.

Elijah was born in 1837, so he and James Wesley were about the same age. I don't know if the two men had ever met even though they were first cousins or if their families corresponded with each other. Their fathers were only two of the sixteen children born to John and Mary McKelvy who had originally settled in South Carolina. With that many relatives, it would have been hard to keep in touch with all of them. These two first cousins found

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themselves on opposite sides in the Civil War.

A few years ago, my wife and I decided to do a little research on that branch of the family. We went to Franklin Co., Tennessee and southeast Missouri where we found much information about them. We learned that Elijah McKelvy was buried at Myers Cemetery in Bollinger County, Missouri. We decided to check that cemetery out since we were there visiting my wife's family. We learned that the cemetery was in a field behind a man's goat pasture. He gave us permission to walk to it. We found the cemetery grown up in tall grass and containing about fifty grave markers. The man said he bush-hogged the cemetery about once each year to keep it from growing up. I wish I had taken a picture of Elijah's grave marker while I was there, but I didn't have a camera with me.

Elijah McKelvy had married just prior to the war. His wife died in 1863 right in the middle of the war. He re-married and later helped establish a school in that county known as the McKelvy School. He died in 1901.

So, we see that families were divided by the Civil War due to circumstances beyond their control. If Elijah had been living in the South, he most likely would have served on the Confederate side, but since his family lived in Missouri, he ended up on the Union side.

Reunions of Civil War veterans were popular for many years after the war, and as time went along, old resentments faded. Most soldiers were just happy to get back home and resume their lives. I have even seen a notice published in the paper for a Decoration Day at the main cemetery in Prescott. It stated that flowers would be placed on all the graves of Civil War soldiers no matter whether they were Confederate or Union. The Civil War was anything but civil. It was a bloody war lasting four long years. A total of about 698,000 men lost their lives in that war which was 2 percent of the population at that time.

The war has been given various names other than the Civil War including "The War Between the States", "The War of the Rebellion", "The Slaveholder's Rebellion", "The Second American Revolution", "The Brothers War", "The War of Northern Aggression", "The War for Southern Independence", and "the late unpleasantness".

FILLING IN THE GAPS – NEWS ITEMS FROM 1896 AND 1897

May 16, 1896—The Arkansas Gazette---Prescott Paragraphs

Many merchants in this town buy their goods in Little Rock. Hogs are running at large in the streets. The Picayune insists on the enforcement of the ordinance regarding stock.

Sept. 19, 1896—The Van Buren Press

Mrs. Eugene Cheatam died at Prescott Monday evening. She is the daughter of Capt. W. R. White, former clerk of Nevada County, and sister of Mrs. Thomas C. McRae.

Nov. 18, 1896—The Arkansas Gazette

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We report the death of W. C. Hatley, one of Prescott's oldest citizens, of heart failure. He was a former merchant at Caney before moving to Prescott. He was a member of the Cumberland Presbyterian church, an affectionate husband and father, and an honest and upright gentleman.

Dec. 26, 1896—The Arkansas Gazette

An article entitled "Prescott—A Peach" describes the town. Population is 3,000. Has good land and prosperous farmers. About 60 first-class business houses including dry goods (J. T. Brooks, B. F. Brown, McMillan & Bros., and W. B. Waller); grocery (W. T. Hart, J. M. White, White Bros., H. Kershaw); millinery (Mrs. E. A. Shankle and Miss Mollie Hinkle); drugs (Hugh Moncrief, George W. Terry, J. D. Howell, Hamilton Drug Co.); livery (John Shiners, C. B. Moore, Horn & Fore); others (Sharp & McDonald, Ira Gee Hardware and Furniture, Higgins Shoe Store); wholesale (Hamilton, McMillan & Co, one of the largest wholesale and retail dry goods businesses in south Arkansas); the cheese factory, W. Abbot's market, two barber shops, The Nevada County Picayune; lawyers (Thompson and Greeson, T. C. McRae, G. R. Hamby, Jay Burns, C. C. Hamby, Guy Nelson); doctors (R. L. Hinton, E. R. Armistead, E. R. Arnold, J. Harris, Hesterly, McAnulty, and J. C. Brown); churches (Episcopal, Baptist, and Presbyterian). Prof. Caraway is principal of the high school with Maud Hays as assistant. Ozan Lumber Co. and Tracy Thomas Lumber Co. employ 150 men. J. W. Bake is the opera house manager.

Feb. 24, 1897—The Arkansas Gazette

To celebrate Arbor Day, students at Tom Allen High School planted a tree in honor of Little Rock—"The City of Roses" with a population of 40,000.

June 13, 1897—The Arkansas Gazette

Seven crews are working putting up telegraph lines to Texarkana. The crews are headquartered at Prescott now.

June 25, 1897—The Forrest City Times

Mrs. P. W. Hall of Prescott died from a dose of strychnine taken by mistake.

July 5, 1897—The Daily Texarkanian

Eight business houses were destroyed by fire on West Front and West Main streets between Citizens Bank and Howell's Drug Store. Some of those destroyed were a vacant building next to the bank, W. T. Hart grocery, J. B. Higgins shoe store, J. H. Kershaw's grocery, H. A. Hamilton & Co. dry goods store, the brick post office, J. R. Henderson's confections and ice cream store.

July 31, 1897—Osceola Times

The mysterious death of a farmer near Prescott named Fuller three weeks ago was cleared up by the deathbed confession of the killer named Graham. He became overheated running from the scene and died shortly after confessing to the killing.

Nov. 10, 1897—The Forrest City Times

A patent was granted to James H. Ellis of Prescott for burglar and fire alarms.

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Don Mathis' Traveler's Checklist

It's the season for a summer vacation. If possible, wait until school starts up in August before you travel; you'll have less competition from all the school-aged children for airfares and motels.

Here is my tried and true list of essentials for travel. I've got to take my glasses, medicines, and hearing aid; health and well-being come first.

I want a set of clothes for every day of a five-day trip; anything longer, and I'll stop at a laundromat. I always carry two pairs of shoes, a wind-breaker, hat and seasonal attire. All my toiletries are ready to go in my ditty bag (including sun screen and insect repellent). Be sure to pack a towel.

A short bottle of bourbon can take the edge off a stressful day of travelling. It can help soothe a sore throat or provide the perfect ending for a perfect day – and it goes well with coffee, steak, or cola.

My address book is helpful for looking up loved ones in distant cities or mailing postcards to friends back home. If I bring an ice chest of perishables, I like to pack frozen water bottles. It keeps water from marinating the meat and provides a drink after it thaws.

Most cell phones include a clock and camera, so that should be on everyone's list. A charger is essential as is a credit card. And before leaving, don't forget to arrange for the pets, stop the mail and newspaper, and adjust your thermostat.

Bon voyage!