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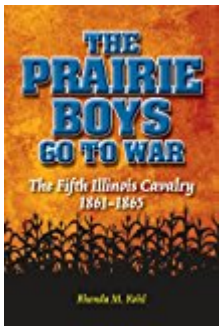
Rhonda M. Kohl. *The Prairie Boys Go to War: The Fifth Illinois Cavalry, 1861-1865.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. xvii + 300 pages $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8093-3203-8.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Regimental histories constitute a significant portion of the Civil War scholarship published each year. Often, these works fall short in offering the general Civil War reader much of value. With a customary focus solely on strategy, tactics, or battlefield statistics, many regimental histories read like encyclopedias, failing to offer any insight into the daily lives of common soldiers or to place individual regiments within the larger social, political, or cultural histories of the war. Rhonda M. Kohl's *The Prairie Boys Go to War: The Fifth Illinois Cavalry, 1861-1865*, however, serves as a guide for how regimental histories should be written. Succeeding in her endeavor to write a well-rounded regimental history, Kohl captures not only the various campaigns and skirmishes related to the Fifth Illinois Cavalry, but also the soldiers' struggles with alcoholism, disease, and starvation as well as their thoughts and opinions regarding issues such as secession, emancipation, race, Copperheads, and the Lincoln administration.

Comprised of a preface and nine chronologically arranged chapters, *The Prairie Boys Go to War* narrates the activities of the Fifth Illinois Cavalry from its organization in August 1861 to October 1865, when the Fifth's remaining cavalrymen mustered out of service. At first glance, Kohl's work is noteworthy for its analysis of a southern Illinois cavalry regiment, which is a topic that had been completely ignored until the publication of *The Prairie Boys Go to War*. Furthermore, Kohl seeks to bring attention to not only the Fifth Illinois Cavalry, but all Federal cavalry in the Western and Trans-Mississippi theaters of the war. According to Kohl, historians have overlooked the contributions of Federal cavalry when acknowledging the Union accomplishments in the Mississippi valley.

Readers will begin by noting the Fifth's role from March 1862 to May 1863 as part of the Army of the Southwest's invasion and occupation of Missouri and Arkansas. During this time, the Fifth came to be known as the "bloody Fifth" for its involvement in intense fighting around Helena, Ar-

kansas, against local guerillas and Texas cavalry. The Fifth also joined Ulysses S. Grant's army in June 1863, just in time to take part in the campaign against Vicksburg. Soon after arriving in Mississippi, the Fifth routed a Confederate cavalry unit under Thomas N. Nelson at Mechanicsburg (forty-five miles northeast of Vicksburg); essentially, this victory is viewed as the highlight of the Fifth's service. Following the surrender of Vicksburg, the Fifth remained in the region and helped secure the states of Mississippi and Louisiana for the Union. In early 1864, members of the Fifth also served under William T. Sherman during a campaign against Meridian, Mississippi, a vital railroad hub of the Confederacy. The Fifth's common practice of confiscation and destruction of civilian property coincided appropriately with Sherman's total war policy. The final chapter covers the Fifth's participation in a largely forgotten campaign that occurred following the April 1865 surrenders: the expedition into Texas to secure the area from Confederate involvement with the Mexican government under French emperor Maximilian.

Although Kohl succeeds in providing a comprehensive traditional narrative of the Fifth, it remains her attention to the social, political, and cultural histories of the Fifth's soldiers that sets *The Prairie Boys Go to War* apart from other regimental histories. Throughout the work, Kohl highlights the human element of war, consistently addressing the Fifth's bouts with alcoholism, disease, political division, and racial issues, among others. According to Kohl, "all this interaction determined how the regiment fought, how it acted within the army as a whole, and how other regiments interacted with it" (p. xi).

The preface and initial chapter do well to highlight the social and cultural character of the regiment, providing an overview of the Fifth's organization and brief biographical profiles of several of its members. Much of the internal strife that plagued the Fifth resulted from the cultural differences related to the geographic origin of its soldiers. Although the Fifth was organized in southern Illinois, a majority of the cavalrymen hailed from counties in central and northern Illinois. The remaining third were from counties in southern Illinois. Referred to as Egypt, southern Illinois maintained a distinct culture and belief system that closely resembled the South. The decision made by Illinois governor Richard Yates to commission exclusively Northern-born Republicans to lead the Democratic-majority Fifth instituted a quandary in the relationship between the regiment's officers and its men that endured throughout the war.

A primary component of the daily lives of the Fifth's soldiers involved commenting on the national politics of the era. As much as the Fifth despised the secessionists, many expressed their utmost abhorrence at the Copperheads (Northern Democrats who criticized Lincoln's war policies and urged peace with the Confederacy). Kohl includes quotes drawn from letters and diaries that demonstrate the Fifth's disgust for Copperheads. One of the best examples involved William A. Skiles, who stated that he "'would ten times rather fight them [Copperheads], & learn them the value of Uncle Sam[']s protection'" than the Confederates (p. 140). Kohl also highlights the Fifth's support of Lincoln by including examples of the regiment's letter-writing campaign to family and friends at home. With the prevalence of Copperhead activity in Illinois, members of the Fifth hoped to secure the reelection of Lincoln in 1864, rather than have George McClellan, branded a Copperhead by members of the Fifth, be president. Although many Federal soldiers could not vote (including Illinois soldiers), their letters home played an important role in securing Lincoln's reelection.[1]

Similar to discussions of party politics, race and emancipation were prominent issues addressed amongst members of the Fifth. Many of the Fifth's soldiers, particularly those from Egypt,

entered the war with discriminatory attitudes toward slaves as well as free African Americans. In 1853, the Illinois legislature had passed the Black Laws, which prevented any blacks from residing in the state for more than ten days; those who remained longer were imprisoned, fined, and auctioned off as a laborer for a set number of days. To a majority of Illinoisans, emancipation threatened the racial order of their state, allowing for an influx of free blacks north of the Ohio River. According to Kohl, the majority of the Fifth, especially the common soldiers, enlisted in the war to preserve the Union rather than free any slaves. Regardless of their original motive, members of the Fifth were forced to confront the issues of race and emancipation while fighting the war.

As the Fifth invaded regions of Arkansas and Mississippi, soldiers witnessed firsthand the horrors of slavery, which they recorded in their diaries, memoirs, and letters home. Comparable to the wartime conversions of other Union soldiers, numerous members of the Fifth had changed their opinion of emancipation by the third year of the war. Speaking for all of Company C in April 1863, Thadeus B. Packard wrote that '"we harkly Concur with the President[']s proclamation, and endorce all Measures that go to put down this Rebellion'" (p. 102). In addition, the opportunity to serve with black Union troops late in the war helped to correct some of Fifth's attitudes regarding race. Still, however, not all members of the Fifth viewed slaves with respect. Kohl includes an episode that occurred in the summer of 1862 in which soldiers from the Fifth raped female slaves on a plantation outside Helena.

Kohl also highlights many of the physical drudgeries that affected the Fifth throughout their four years of service. *The Prairie Boys Go to War* pays particular attention to the medical history of the Fifth, discussing in detail the regiment's suffering with numerous diseases that infected its soldiers (dysentery, typhoid, malaria, and typhus). Within the Fifth, 386 men died of disease compared to eleven who were killed in action. This ratio correctly represents the extraordinary percent of Civil War soldiers who succumbed to illness rather than lead. The Fifth also experienced prolonged periods of near dehydration and starvation, which often resulted in its raiding of local plantations or Southern towns. Alcoholism, a product of both boredom and poor discipline, also proved to be a substantial concern for the Fifth. In addition to the increased pillaging of local citizens, excessive alcohol consumption also negatively impacted social order in camp. One such incident resulted in the death of Maurice Dee. After an evening of drinking, Dee's best friend, Alexander Jessop, claimed that he could shoot a goblet off Dee's head. Instead of striking the goblet, the round from Jessop's gun struck Dee in the neck, killing him instantly. Realizing that he had just killed his best friend, Jessop attempted suicide, only to be restrained by fellow soldiers and arrested for murder.

Ultimately, readers of Kohl's work will gain a real understanding of the men that served in the Fifth, in addition to obtaining a greater analysis of Federal soldiers overall. Without Kohl's attention to the history of the Fifth outside the smoke of battle, her work would be valuable to only those interested in the military history of the Western or Trans-Mississippi theaters of the Civil War, particularly the specific campaigns in which the Fifth participated. However, due to the complexity of her scholarship, Kohl reaches a much broader audience. Political, social, or cultural historians of the Civil War or U.S. history during the nineteenth century would benefit from reading *The Prairie Boys Go to War*.

Note

[1]. For more information on the role Union soldiers played in helping secure Lincoln's reelection in 1864, see Jennifer L. Weber, "All the President's Men: The Politicization of Union Soldiers and How They Saved Abraham Lincoln," in *The Struggle for Equality: Essays on Sectional Con-*

flict, the Civil War, and the Long Reconstruction, ed. Orville Vernon Burton, Jerald Podair, and Jennifer L. Weber (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 76-90.