

DANIEL ELLIS

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The division of Northern and Southern sympathy during the Civil War can not be identified by a sharply defined line running from west to east across the United States. Instead, for example, there were patches of Union sympathy in the midst of Confederate territory. These areas were, of course, more common in the border states, and one of the strongholds of Union loyalty was in the mountains of East Tennessee.

From these mountains came a man who may have had more influence than any other single person on the outcome of the Civil War. This man was Daniel Ellis, who was born December 30, 1827¹ (6) in Carter County, Tennessee. (14) His father, Wiley Ellis, although a small landholder, had eight children and was, thus, comparatively poor. (14)

Dan grew up in the way of all farm boys of that time and place. He spent his time working on the farm, hunting and fishing. There was little available schooling (14) and Dan would probably not have been satisfied as a student had there been. He was apparently a born leader, but not a follower.

When he was nineteen, Dan enlisted in the 5th regiment of the Tennessee Volunteer Army under Captain Patterson. He and his fellow soldiers left Jonesboro, Tennessee about March 1, 1847. They went in flatboats to Chattanooga where the flatboats were taken in tow by steamboats and pulled to Memphis and then to New Orleans. They reached Vera Cruz, Mexico on April 1, 1847, but the Mexican War ended before they saw any exciting service. (14)

¹ Scott and Angel(14) say he was born on December 27, 1827. The correct date might be found in the county records of Carter County in Elizabethton, Tennessee.

Ellis, as well as most of his friends from upper East Tennessee, found the Mexican climate very unfavorable to his health. He felt that the trip affected his physical condition for the rest of his life. (6)

Upon his return from Mexico, Ellis realized that he needed to learn a trade. He was subsequently apprenticed as a wagon and carriage maker at Jonesboro. (14) While there he married Martha May (17) and then returned to Carter County where he farmed and worked at his trade. (14)

When the Civil War began, Dan was 34 years old. He was six feet tall, with a muscular, athletic build, black hair, black eyes and a "rather handsome face with nothing about it to betray to the ordinary observer the resolute character he afterward displayed." Those who knew him regarded him as a kind, honest, law-abiding man of good judgement and ability. (14)

East Tennessee was a crucial area to both armies during the war. Whoever had the military control there held a strategic position. The North never seemed to be able to gain this control until very late, so the Confederate soldiers occupied the area for the major part of war time. Union sympathizers there did not organize quickly enough, so that their communities were overrun with Rebel soldiers trying to force them to join the Confederate Army. When they refused, they were forced to leave their homes and hide in the mountains. Those who did not were taken prisoner or shot as traitors. (This information is found in almost all histories of the area.)

Some of the East Tennessee men resorted to a type of guerilla tactic early in the war. They joined a group commonly known as "the bridgeburners." The plan of these men was to burn all the bridges of the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad from Bristol to Chattanooga and also the bridge across the Tennessee River at Bridgeport, Alabama, thus cutting off the major supply route of the Confederates. The understanding was that General

Thomas' army would then move into East Tennessee at once. All the bridges were attacked and many were burned. Thomas was moving in when ordered to return by General Sherman. The deserved deliverance from Confederate oppression did not come. Indeed, for reasons too many and varied to explain here, it was more than two years before Union soldiers reached East Tennessee. (14)

It was on the night of November 8, 1861 that a small band of men destroyed the bridge across the Holston River and Dan Ellis was a member of the group. When no help from the North arrived, many of the bridgeburners who had been recognized were captured and shot. Others unwillingly left their homes to join the Union forces, and still others were forced to hide themselves in the mountains. Dan was with the latter group, but found that he could not be satisfied with waiting, so he carried letters from the hiding men to their families. (14) Thus, his natural ability as a scout was discovered.

When the men realized that no help was forthcoming, they decided they must go to join the army. They could not return to their homes and they were tired of waiting. Dan Ellis was their first choice to lead them across the mountains to Kentucky.

The first trip was successful and on his return Dan found that another large group had already formed and was waiting in the mountains for him to pilot them to Kentucky. From then until almost the end of the war there was no rest for him, but there was always someone who was demanding his service as a pilot. (6)

From 1862 until August 1863 Daniel Ellis made ten trips to Kentucky. (4) He usually went to Camp Dick Robinson (12) where his charges could join the Union Army. Although this is a simple journey today, in 1862 there were many obstacles. Doe and Watauga Rivers were "often so swollen they could

not be crossed for days at a time." After that came both the North and South Forks of the Holston River, Bays and Clinch Mountains, Clinch River, Coffers Ridge, Coffey Creek (almost a river), Powell's Mountains, Waldens Ridge, Wildcat Ridge, Wildcat Mountain, Powell's River, Cumberland Mountain, and Cumberland River. (14) After the Union soldiers moved into Knoxville it was much easier for Ellis to go there, so he made seven trips to Knoxville between January 1864 and February 1865. (4)

Dan was described by men who knew him during these years as a "man of great coolness, daring and shrewdness..." (15), such that he was called the "Old Red Fox." (14) The list of his virtues continues almost endlessly - wary, vigilant, sleepless as an Indian, "knows every secluded path and every Union man through an immense range of country" (10), "brave as Belisarius, but prudent and cunning," candid, generous, etc., etc. (1)

There is no definite figure of the number of men Dan piloted through the lines, but estimates range from 4,000 (14) to 10,000 (15) Among his more well-known charges were some war correspondents for northern newspapers who had been prisoners of the Confederacy, but had escaped. They were very generous with their praise of their guide. (1, 10, 11, 13)

As for Ellis' personal feelings about the war, they were very strongly patriotic. At first, however, he "was a man of pleasing manners and averse to bloodshed." In the first part of his piloting experience, in fact, he did not even carry a gun, but depended on his wits to help him escape the enemy. After a number of close calls, seeing some of his friends killed and having a price put on his own head (14), Dan began to carry a Winchester, which was described as "unerring." (14) He had so many narrow escapes that he became a predestinarian in the fullest sense of the word. By the end of the war he had been both shot and stabbed once or twice, but not seriously. (1)

In January of 1865 Daniel Ellis accepted appointment as Captain of Company A of the 13th Regiment of the Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry (16, 19) as his services as a pilot were not greatly needed by then. (14)

In the book which he wrote after the war about his piloting adventures he was adamant in his denouncement of "gangs of murderous desperados" - Confederates. He strongly condemned Jefferson Davis, saying " His infamy and moral turpitude I am altogether unable to employ language to describe, but ... the extinction of his insignificant life could in no degree atone for his damning deeds." (6)

Dan's life after the war was frequently threatened so that he was never without arms. He was accused of being a thief during the war, but he only took horses from his enemies, who were wealthy Rebels. Then, in true Robin Hood style, he was generous with his money, giving to those who had little.

He collected a large historical and religious library and lived the remainder of his life in Hampton, Tennessee. (14) He died in 1907 and was buried in the Ellis Cemetery in the 14th district of Carter County. (7)

Personal Comments

1. I am personally interested in Daniel Ellis because I live near his home in Carter County, Tennessee. Also, I have other connections that are stated in the following letter from my father, J. R. Garland: "Martha, your paternal grandfather was a corporal in Company L, 13th Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry and Dan Ellis was captain of Company A. Your grandfather and Captain Ellis were friends." I also know that my grandfather, John Riley Garland (April 5, 1845 - April 11, 1920) went with Dan Ellis to join the Union Army. Ulysses S. Grant Ellis, Dan's son, was one of my father's favorite teachers.
2. The sentiment concerning the Civil War still smoulders among older citizens of Carter and surrounding counties and is passed on to more receptive youngsters. For this reason individuals in the area would perhaps be possible sources of unwritten narratives about the war.
3. In her book The Grandfather and the Globe Dell B. Wilson has a note about Dan Ellis' book in her bibliography. She says, "This is considered to have been ghost written and I think due to classical allusions, etc. undoubtedly is. Copies are impossible to get, so I had a typist copy the book for me. Robey Barton Brown, C.S.A. bought up all copies he could find and destroyed them because one illustration showed him doing a dance around the hanging bodies of Union men." I do not personally think that anyone has the right to assume that Dan Ellis could not have written "his book." Many men of his day and circumstance were self-educated, if educated at all.
4. Following is a bibliography of sources in which Ellis is mentioned and another bibliography of possible sources of material. All are found at Emory unless otherwise indicated. It is possible that he may be mentioned in other unindexed personal narratives which I have not read or scanned. There is no easy way to approach such material.

1. Browne, Junius Henri. Four Years in Secessia: Adventures Within and Beyond Union Lines.... O. D. Case and Company, Hartford, 1865. (E468.9 B88)

Browne was a war correspondent of the New York Tribune during the Civil War. He first mentions Ellis on page 403ff. Here there is a description of his meeting with the famous scout and the beginning of his journey as an escaped prisoner of the Confederacy.

Chapter 53 is entitled "Dan Ellis, the Famous Pilot." Browne is generous with his praise of Ellis, calling him "one of the notabilities of East Tennessee." This chapter extends from page 409 to page 416 after which Browne continues to mention Ellis as he continues his story of the escape through the Confederate lines to the North.

2. Cooper, Horton. History of Avery County, North Carolina. Biltmore Press, 9 Valley Street, Asheville, N. C., 1964. (Elizabethton Public Library, Elizabethton, Tenn.)

This history of one of Carter County's adjoining counties in North Carolina describes the travels of men from "counties east of the Blue Ridge" who joined Dan Ellis, the "Red Fox" and were piloted to Federal lines in Tennessee.

3. Dugger, Shepherd M. The War Trails of the Blue Ridge. Observer Printing House, Charlotte, N. C., 1932. (Elizabethton Public Library)

Dugger mentions Dan Ellis as a Union scout on pages 111, 126, and 127.

4. East Tennessee Historical Society Publication. East Tennessee Historical Society, Knoxville. Vol. 1 & 2, 1929-30. (F422.1 E37 1 & 2) No. 20, 1948, p. 82 also mentions Ellis.

In volume 2, page 68, the war correspondents are mentioned. Richardson and Browne "arrived in Knoxville January 13, 1865." The same volume, page 248-251 tells of Ellis' trips. It says that there were 10 trips to Kentucky from 1862 to August of 1863 and 7 to Knoxville from January 1864 to February 1865. Ellis' book is also noted.

5. Elizabethton Star. Elizabethton, Tennessee. Sunday, February 24, 1957 (Tennessee State Library, Nashville and University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Copies are also probably at the Elizabethton Public Library.)

There is a photo of Henry Clay Beasley on page 6D. The caption under the picture states that Beasley was a friend of Dan Ellis. On the same page is an article about the store owned by Beasley during the Civil War. Ellis used to come to the store after the war and tell stories of his war experiences.

On page 7D is the context of a letter carried by Ellis from David K. Stout, who died in prison, to his wife in Carter County. When this newspaper story was printed in 1957, the original letter was in the possession of Fred Stout, David Stout's nephew, who was then living at Shell Creek in Carter County.

6. Ellis, Daniel. Thrilling Adventures of Daniel Ellis, the Great Union Guide of East Tennessee, For a Period of Nearly Four Years During the Great Southern Rebellion. Written by Himself. Containing a short biography of the author. Harper and Brothers, New York, 1867. (E601 E44)

The short biography of the author mentioned in the citation above is actually an autobiography. Ellis gives a few minor facts about his life, but the book itself only deals with the years during which he was a scout. It is written with surprising classical knowledge. The detailed descriptions of the journeys become rather boring toward the end because they are really not very different. The descriptions of the atrocities of the war are biased, of course, but they appear to be based on truth. He includes many personal names.

7. Historical marker at Valley Forge Bridge, Valley Forge, Carter County, Tennessee.

The Old Red Fox

At Valley Forge Dan Ellis usually assembled recruits for the Federal regiments, whom he guided over the obscure mountain trails to Kentucky, while East Tennessee was under Confederate control. Born 1827 and a veteran of the Mexican War he was subsequently Captain of Company A, 13th Tennessee Cavalry, U.S.A. He died 1907, was buried in Family Cemetery 14th district.

8. Hopkins, C. T. Old Settlers of Hickory Tree. (No publisher, date, or place given. Probably published privately about 1948-1950. (Elizabethton Public Library)

This is sketches of the Hopkins family. On page 22 the author tells of his father's stories of scouting from Carter County to join the Federal army at Knoxville. His guide was Dan Ellis.

9. Merritt, Frank. Early History of Carter County, Tennessee 1760-1861. Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee. Arthur and Smith Printing Company, Knoxville, 1950. (Elizabethton Public Library)

Captain Dan Ellis is mentioned in footnotes on pages 6 and 102. On page 109 in a list of early Methodist families is "The Dan Ellises."

10. New York Tribune, February 8, 1965.

Junius H. Browne tells the first part of the story and Albert D. Richardson tells the second part. "Twenty Months in the South" p. 1, col. 4-6; p. 8, col. 1-5.

Browne does not mention Ellis, but Richardson praises him highly: "Ellis is a genius and his life is a romance...to us he was like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."

11. New York Weekly Tribune, January 28, 1865. "Escape of Our Correspondents," p. 6, col. 5. Article "From the Cincinnati Gazette, 19th."

This is the story of the escape of Richardson and Browne from prison and then to the North. It tells of their joining "a party of North Carolina refugees numbering about 80, under the charge of a guide who has made the delivery of prisoners from the hands of the Rebels a business for more than three years past." This was probably Ellis.

Note: This same article was printed in the New York Tribune on January 23, 1865, p. 1, col. 4.

12. Patton, James Welch. Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1860-1869. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1934. (F436 P32)

Tells of the Union sympathizers in East Tennessee who went North to join the Union armies. Camp Dick Robinson in Kentucky was a convenient place for them to join and "Dan Ellis, 'the great Union guide' piloted hundreds of loyalists across the mountains to this post."

13. Richardson, Albert D. The Secret Service, The Field, The Dungeon and The Escape. American Publishing Company, Hartford, 1866. (E468.9 R52 1866)

Chapter 46, p. 487ff tells about the experience with Daniel Ellis, in which Ellis is highly praised. It also gives details of the escape of the war correspondents.

There is a portrait of Daniel Ellis facing page 488.

14. Scott, Samuel W. and Samuel P. Angel. History of the Thirteenth Regiment Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry, U.S.A. P.W. Ziegler and Co., Philadelphia, Pa., 1903. (E531.6 13th)

Daniel Ellis is mentioned throughout this book. First, on page 78 he is named in connection with the bridgeburners, then on page 95, again, as a bridgeburner, but this time in the capacity of a letter-carrier to the bridgeburners hiding out in the woods.

I find this book to contain the most complete account in one source of Ellis' life. This account is scattered throughout, on the following pages: 98, 109, facing 129 (portrait, same as in his book), 136, 141, facing 144 (photograph), 148, 223, 311, 360, 378, 423-447 (Chapter 29 devoted to Ellis.)

15. Temple, Oliver. East Tennessee and the Civil War. Robert Clarke Co., Cincinnati, 1899. (E531 T4)

Tells of Ellis as a "matchless pilot and leader" on page 426. The book is generally a good source for descriptions of the East Tennessee people and the war there.

16. Tennesseans in the Civil War, vol. 2. Civil War Centennial Commission, Nashville, 1965.

On page 505 is the record of "Ellis, Daniel, Capt. A Co. 13th Cav."

17. The Watauga Spinnerette. American Bemberg Corporation, Beaunit Fibers, North American Rayon Corporation, Elizabethton, Tennessee, XXIV, iii, April, 1949, page 10-39. (Many of these magazines are in the possession of employees of the American Bemberg Corporation at Elizabethton. The particular information used here came from the copy owned by Mr. Lewis Taylor, Industrial Relations Director, Beaunit Fibers.)

Includes a photography of Dan and his wife Martha, whose maiden name was May. There is also a photo of a log church and a school house which he built, and a photo of Andy Stover, grandson of Andrew Johnson, who lived with with Captain Ellis.

18. Wiley, Bell I., Allan Nevins, and James I. Robertson. Civil War Books, a Critical Bibliography. L.S.U. Press, Baton Rouge, 1967. (RZ1242 C58)

These esteemed historians must depend upon their reputations rather than first-hand knowledge to justify the statement that "[t]oo many of the Hollywood-like escapades of Ellis seem exaggerated." This statement is in their review of Ellis' autobiography. They do admit that the book "throws light on divided sentiment in East Tennessee throughout the war." (page 85)

On page 200 they say that Richardson's The Secret Service... has "detail and accuracy."

19. Wright, General Marcus J. Tennessee in the War, 1861-1865. Ambrose Lee Publishing Co., Williamsbridge, New York City, 1908. (E579 W7)

Contains lists of organizations and officers of Confederate and Union armies, battles, Confederate and U. S. Congress members. On page 160 it states that Daniel Ellis was appointed captain on Jan. 13, 1865 in the 13th Regiment, Volunteer Army.

Suggested Possible Sources

Ellis' granddaughter, Mrs. E. Niles Brown, teaches in Elizabethton, Tennessee. She lives at 301 Allen Avenue, Elizabethton.

Checklist of Microfilms in the Tennessee State Archives, Nashville, 1963. (RZ1337 T387)

On page 3, no. 13, is the memoir of Samuel Milligan who was an East Tennessee Unionist. He went behind Union lines for protection. The original is in the possession of S. J. Milligan (grandson) of Boxwood Manor, Greenville, Tennessee.

Colburn, Richard T. (Correspondent of the Cincinnati Gazette)
Recollections of Twenty Campaigns (Cut from Public Spirit, vol. 3, pp. 15-31, Troy, N.Y. 1868)

I got this citation from the National Union Catalog. The magazine Public Spirit is not at Emory but can be seen at the Library of Congress and the American Antiquarian Society.

Kruzas, Anthony T. Directory of Special Libraries and Information Centers. (RR Z675 A2K7)

From this I obtained two possible sources of further materials: the Atlanta Historical Society's Margaret Mitchell Memorial Library at 1754 Peachtree St. N.W., Atlanta, GA, and also, the Tennessee State Library and Archives in Nashville, Tennessee.

Loyal Publication Society Pamphlets, No. 73. Bryant, N.Y., 1864.
(E463 L69 45-78)

Address of Hon. N.G. Taylor, Late Representative of East Tennessee entitled "Relief for East Tennessee" at a meeting at Cooper Institute on March 10, 1964. This is a fascinating speech, which mentions men who left their homes for Kentucky.

U.S. Library of Congress. A Guide to the Study of the United States of America.... (R Z1236.G7)

Andrews, J. Cutler. The North Reports the Civil War. [Pittsburgh] University of Pittsburg Press, 1955.

Methodology of Research

1. Checked Hyamson to see if Dan Ellis was mentioned in any general biographical sources. He was not. Likewise, I checked the encyclopedias and he was not mentioned.
2. Then I went to the card catalog and found the book by Ellis which I checked out to read.
3. Checked all references given in the card catalog under Tennessee - History - Civil War and East Tennessee - History - Civil War. Looked at some that seemed appropriate under U.S. - History - Civil War.
4. Next I checked manuscript guides: NUC of Manuscript Collections, Guide to Manuscripts of the Tennessee Historical Society, guides to U.S. Archives and to Tennessee Archives, Carnegie Institution Manuscript Guides, etc.
5. I then looked at the NY Times Index and checked all possible references. There was nothing under Ellis, but I checked references to Tennessee, bridge-burners, etc. I checked approximately 80 of these references on microfilm.
6. I then checked ready reference history tools and reference history tools: Historical Abstracts, Cambridge, Appleton's, Civil War Dictionary, American Biographies, etc.
7. Checked lists of subject collections: Ash, Downes, etc. and also bibliographies of American History: Beers, LC Guide to Study of U.S..., Writings in American History, Bartlet, Civil War in the U.S., Donald, The Nation in Crisis.
8. By this time I had read Ellis' book and found the reference to the New York Tribune correspondent, Richardson. I found his article in the Tribune, and also the mention of Browne and others. I followed these up in the NUC and then discovered two of their books at Emory.

9. I then checked the references I had obtained from the catalog that were in special collections at the Emory Library. These were fruitless.
10. I then went back to the Tennessee Historical Society Publication and East Tennessee Historical Magazine checking all issues.
11. A very important part of the search was done by my mother, Mrs. J.R. Garland, who because of her interest in Ellis did the work at the Elizabethton Library and sent me materials of her own.