

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS Colloquy

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Utmost Disorder: The Capture of Brigadier General Robert Vance

DURING A COLD SNAP IN JANUARY OF 1864, BRIGADIER GENERAL ROBERT Vance led his Confederate forces beyond “Quallytown, up the Ocona Lufty and through Collins Gap” down into the Tennessee side of the Smokies. The plan was for Vance and his men to distract Union General Burnside who had been harassing Confederate General Longstreet on his maneuvers heading towards Richmond. Vance, a native of western North Carolina and brother of Governor Zebulon Vance, was in charge of guarding the passes on the North Carolina/Tennessee state line which were essential to maintaining communication links throughout the South.

The trip across the Smokies was arduous. The road was a rough, hastily-created path constructed earlier by Colonel William Holland Thomas and his party of Cherokee known as Thomas’s Legion. Troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James L. Henry and Thomas accompanied Vance across the mountains. Vance and his men were able to get their wagons successfully to the top of the gap but had difficulty navigating the steep slope on the

Tennessee side. The cannons had to be dismantled and dragged down the mountain-side. The wheels and axles of the wagons were dismantled and hauled to lower ground where they were reassembled.

Vance’s ultimate destination was Newport, Tennessee. After crossing the mountains, Vance parted company with Thomas and Henry who then headed to Gatlinburg. The troops under the command of Vance travelled to Sevierville where they were fortunate to

Brigadier General Robert Vance
(Courtesy of the State Archives
of North Carolina)



continued on p. 2...



Dr. L. R. Hesler at work in his laboratory, circa 1950 (See story on the Database of the Smokies, p. 3)

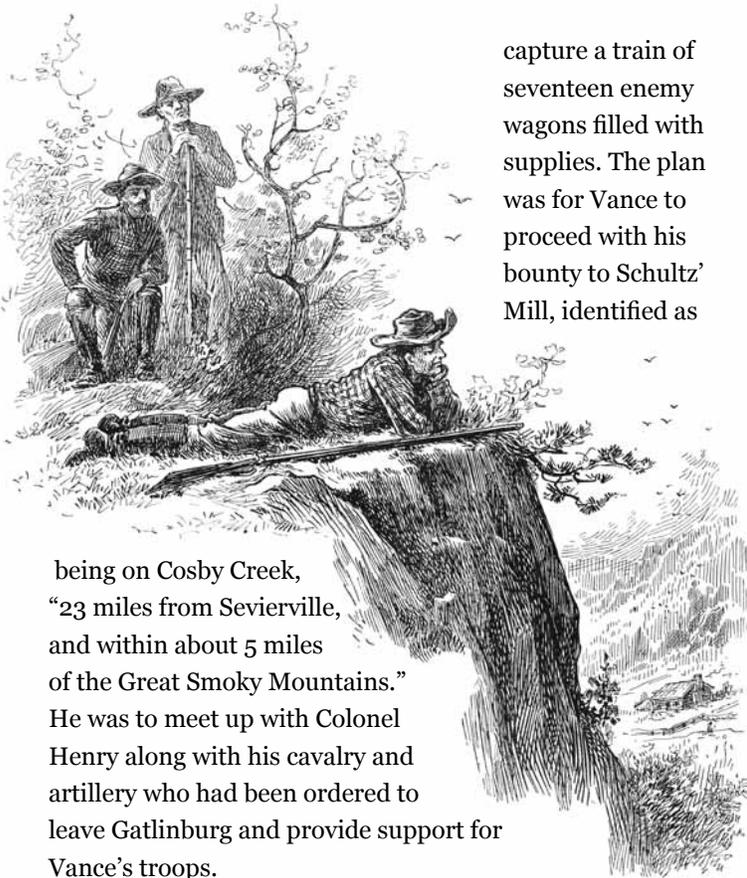
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being on Cosby Creek, “23 miles from Sevierville, and within about 5 miles of the Great Smoky Mountains.” He was to meet up with Colonel Henry along with his cavalry and artillery who had been ordered to leave Gatlinburg and provide support for Vance’s troops.

Vance and his men arrived at Schultz’ Mill only to find that Henry was not there. After resting and feeding the animals, Vance planned to proceed to Newport, but was surprised by federal troops. In the words of Colonel William J. Palmer of the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry, “I immediately charged them in column of fours, routing their entire command, which fled in the utmost disorder, throwing away their guns, belts, blankets, saddle-bags, etc, and most of them quitting their horses.”

As a result of this surprise attack, General Vance, two officers who formed part of his staff, and forty-nine men out of 300 were captured. In addition to the prisoners, the federal forces also captured about 150 horses, over 100 “stand of arms,” and a fine ambulance filled with medical equipment “of which we were sadly in need,” and all the wagons, mules, food, and prisoners that Vance had taken earlier in the trip. Palmer was anxious to complete the rout by travelling to Gatlinburg and attacking Thomas’s Legion, a force of approximately 150 Cherokee, two pieces of artillery, and ten to twelve wagons. He wrote, “If some fresh cavalry can be sent here immediately, these Indians and guns can be captured.” Meanwhile the prisoners, including General Vance, were sent to Knoxville.

On the Confederate side, the fiasco at Schultz’ Mill was also reported by a Colonel Palmer, Colonel John B. Palmer of the 58th North Carolina Infantry. As elated as the Union

capture a train of seventeen enemy wagons filled with supplies. The plan was for Vance to proceed with his bounty to Schultz’ Mill, identified as

Colonel Palmer was at the capture, the Confederate Colonel Palmer was equally dismayed. He cited Vance for having no rear guard or pickets out to alert him of the presence of federal troops. He wrote, “the enemy were enabled to approach within 100 yards before they were discovered. The surprise was complete.”

Palmer was furious at Henry who decided to remain with Thomas in Gatlinburg instead of meeting Vance as directed. Palmer postulated that if Henry had obeyed the orders, “this calamity could have been avoided...as the country immediately above Schultz’ Mill is admirably adapted to defense.” Palmer added, “I shall feel it incumbent upon me to place Lieutenant-Colonel Henry under arrest for disobedience of orders, to await the decision of the general commanding as to whether he shall be tried by the general court-martial now in session at this place.” Although Confederate records are a little sketchy, there is no evidence that Henry was ever court-martialed.

After a few stops, General Vance was sent to Fort Delaware on Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River. He was given the job of buying clothing for his fellow Confederate prisoners until his parole in March 1865 by President Lincoln, granted under the condition that he not fight again. In 1872, Vance was elected to Congress where he became the Chair of Committee on Patents. After declining to run for re-election in 1884, he was appointed by President Grover Cleveland to the position of Assistant Commissioner of Patents. He retired in 1896 and died three years later at his farm in Alexander, North Carolina. He is buried along with his brother Zebulon in Asheville’s Riverside Cemetery.

Due to topography and the scarcity of population, the Smokies were mostly a backwater during the Civil War, home to bounty hunters and marauders. But the story of the capture of General Vance illustrates the importance placed on communication links within the Confederacy, even if those links did involve a very difficult route across the mountain passes.

SOURCES USED IN THIS ARTICLE INCLUDE:

“Robert Brank Vance.” *Western North Carolina Heritage*. http://toto.lib.unca.edu/WNC_biography/vance_robt_brank.htm.

John Preston Arthur. *Western North Carolina: A History from 1730 to 1913*. Asheville: The Edward Buncombe Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1914.

“Report of Col. William J. Palmer, Fifteenth Pennsylvania Cavalry.” “Report of Col. John B. Palmer, Fifty-eighth North Carolina Infantry, commanding Western District of North Carolina.” *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series I, vol. 32, part I—reports. (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1891), p. 74-6.

ABOVE: Union Men of North Carolina (From: *The Story of American Heroism: Thrilling Narratives of Personal Adventures during the Civil War*. Springfield, Ohio: J.W. Jones, 1897. p. 441)

The full-text of both the Arthur book and the two Palmer reports can be found online in Google books: books.google.com.



Introducing the DATABASE OF THE SMOKIES

HAVE YOU EVER WISHED THAT THERE WAS a place to go when you wanted information on the Smokies—one site where you could research history, plants, animals, and culture and find links to online articles and digitized photographs? The Great Smoky Mountains Regional Project at the University of Tennessee Libraries proudly announces the official release of the new Database of the Smokies (DOTS), a free online bibliography of Smoky Mountain material published since 1934, the date of the

establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. DOTS contains searchable records of books, scholarly and popular journal articles, government and scientific reports, theses and dissertations, maps, digitized photographs, and travel guides. Wherever copyright restrictions permit, citations are linked to the full text of the published item. DOTS can be visited on the UT Libraries' website at: dots.lib.utk.edu.

DOTS is intended to compliment *Terra Incognita: An Annotated Bibliography of the Great Smoky Mountains, 1544–1934*, scheduled for publication by the University of Tennessee Press in the summer of 2013. With DOTS and *Terra Incognita*, researchers will have access to a wealth of published material documenting over 400 years of human activity in the Smokies and surrounding region.

DOTS currently contains about 2,000 citations, focused within the fields of biology and ecology, and includes the research publications of distinguished former University of Tennessee botanists Aaron Sharp, Stanley Cain, and L. R. Hesler. In addition to important early studies of Smokies biology, DOTS contains citations to published material from the areas of history, psychology, genealogy, archaeology, economics, tourism, environmental studies, geology, literature, cultural studies, and park management. In the future, we plan to add links to the digitized photographs from our online collections and to other content freely available on the internet. As the content expands, DOTS should become a comprehensive resource for “all things Smokies.”

The project team has been hard at work on DOTS since May 2011, building the database around Drupal, an open-source platform particularly suited for managing content. Drupal is both versatile and flexible. It affords not only easy-to-use search functions, but also allows expansion of the bibliography through crowd-sourcing, an innovative collaborative web technique. Calling on the collective knowledge of a community of users, crowd-sourcing will allow users of DOTS to become contributors by identifying new publications and uploading citations. We welcome your participation.

YOU CAN BE A PART OF THE DATABASE OF THE SMOKIES

DOTS offers a unique opportunity for readers of the *Colloquy* to help us build the bibliography by participating in its crowd-sourcing feature. Crowd-sourcing encourages participants to create an account and submit citations to books, articles, and other Smoky Mountains materials that are not currently in the database. Users will be able to upload links to content that is not restricted by copyright. Crowd-sourcing through DOTS takes advantage of the collective knowledge of informed individuals in advancing toward a comprehensive, easily-searchable bibliography of everything published concerning the Great Smoky Mountains. Be a part of the Smokies Project—become a contributor to DOTS by visiting the website at: dots.lib.utk.edu.

ABOVE: Dr. Aaron J. Sharp and Dr. Stanley Cain taking field notes in the Smokies, circa 1935

BELOW: Research expedition on Mount LeConte with Dr. L. R. Hesler (far left) and Stanley A. Cain (far right) in front row and Aaron J. Sharp in back row (far right), circa 1935



New on the Smokies Bookshelf

NON-FICTION
 George Ellison.
 Artwork by Elizabeth
 Ellison. *Permanent*

Camp: Poems, Narratives and Renderings from the Smokies. The Natural History Press, 2012.

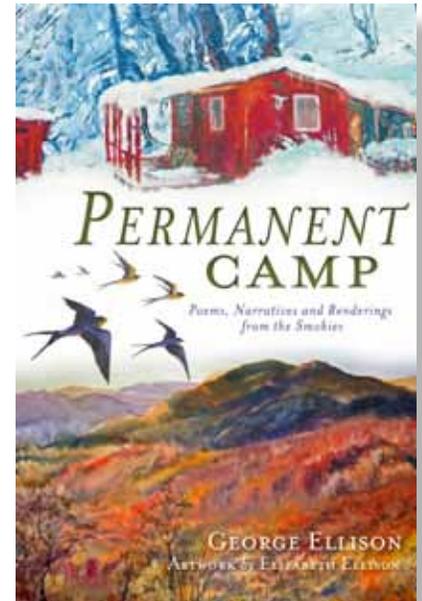
George Ellison, long regarded as one of the foremost journalistic writers on the Great Smoky Mountains, returns to his roots as a poet in his latest book, *Permanent Camp: Poems, Narratives and Renderings from the Smokies*. Combining his own voice with that of Horace Kephart, William Barnes, Petrarch, and the Cherokee elders, Ellison invokes the mystery and the rhythms of the Smoky Mountains. *Permanent Camp* is accompanied by

visually stunning watercolors and pen-and-ink washes by George's wife, Elizabeth.

George and Elizabeth have lived for the better part of forty years in what amounts to a permanent camp along a roaring stream in a quaint cove tucked in tight against the mountains. Their interrelated poems, narratives, renderings, and paintings form a responsive whole to the works of others who have roamed and appreciated the Great Smoky Mountains. As we head into the winter season, a haiku from *Permanent Camp*, p. 66:

Even in Winter

*stones in the creek bed
 will speak to you quite clearly
 in praise of water*



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