

Memoirs of an Ozark Pioneer and Civil War Soldier



Private James Frances Coatney,
First Arkansas Union Cavalry,
Company D

By T. R. Coatney
Edited by J. K. Phillips

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2008



James Frances Coatney, 1914

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my dear father Willie Coatney, who gave these stories to me after staying with and caring for my great grandfather James Coatney until his death, and then steadfastly helping Uncle Henry and Aunt Lucy care for James Coatney's beloved wife Mary until she, too, passed.

Foreword

When TR Coatney graciously asked me to write his great grandfather's stories, I was at once flattered and humbled. An expert on everything Ozark, TR was born and raised in the hills of southwest Missouri where he now resides with his childhood sweetheart and wife.

Coatney's memoirs demonstrate a deep appreciation for patriotism with his having personally served and sacrificed during the Vietnam War. Sadly, in the summer of 1971 TR tragically suffered the terrible effects of nerve gas poisoning while on duty, which ended his military career and left him on the verge of death. Though he still battles chronic side effects 40 years later, he rejoices in the fact that the nerve damage caused by the accident worked to sharpen his childhood memories, giving him a fresh perspective on stories from his father, who was raised by Private James Frances Coatney, a proud soldier of the First Arkansas Union Cavalry.

The historical value of this project is undisputed, and is eloquently supported by Christopher Rein in his Master's Thesis on the Trans-Mississippi Union Army. Rein writes,

> *Discovering the true motivations of the soldiers who comprised these regiments is hampered by a paucity of primary sources. Few Trans-Mississippi southerners kept diaries or left memoirs of their experiences in the Union army. For men who were forced to conceal their beliefs or suffer brutal persecution, diary keeping could be a hazardous undertaking. Likewise, the stigma of federal service, especially after the end of Reconstruction, made those who had assisted federal arms unpopular with their*

neighbors and outside the southern mainstream. Many of the men covered in this survey were not literate, and therefore unable to record their feelings or experiences.[1]

TR Coatney's memoirs provide a candid glimpse into a small part of that unrecorded fragile history that now teeters on the edge of extinction. His enthusiasm for local history and his folksy wit and humor make his stories engaging, yet heartwarming.

--JK Phillips
Author, *Jakie Creek: Legacy of an Ozark Outlaw*

1. Christopher Rein, *Trans-Mississippi Southerners in the Union Army, 1862-1865* (p. 5).

Preface

As a kid I loved to sit around the woodstove at the old Eagle Rock store and listen to Dad and other old timers tell stories about the area. They couldn't care less about what happened in Little Rock or St. Louis!

My dad, Willie Coatney, especially enjoyed telling stories about his iconic grandfather James Frances Coatney who proudly served in Company D of the First Arkansas Union Cavalry during the Civil War.

Those "woodstove" stories made the Eagle Rock/Golden area of southwest Missouri a fascinating place to grow up. What follows is a collection of some of those stories as they were passed to me.

For 40 years I have tried to find glitches in the stories my father told, but every time I think I have found one, I find the story rings true. I think he's "up there" grinning at me for trying so hard.

Dad said even in old age, whenever James Coatney saw the United States flag flying overhead, he would stand, ever vigilant, and watch as if he was afraid someone might tear it asunder. Strongly opposed to groups like the United Confederate Veterans, he would declare, "We are united again. The Union is the victor...

"The Confederates stood for nothing more than organized treason, and there is no honor in treason!"

I very much cherish the stories from an old Union soldier, whose name may be lost to history, like so many other war heroes. But as his great grandson, I especially respect and admire James Frances Coatney for his brave and loyal service to this great land. Let no American forget the extraordinary

sacrifice and agony forged by the Civil War, North and South.

My earnest prayer is that someday war will no longer be a part of this "civilized" world.

--TR Coatney

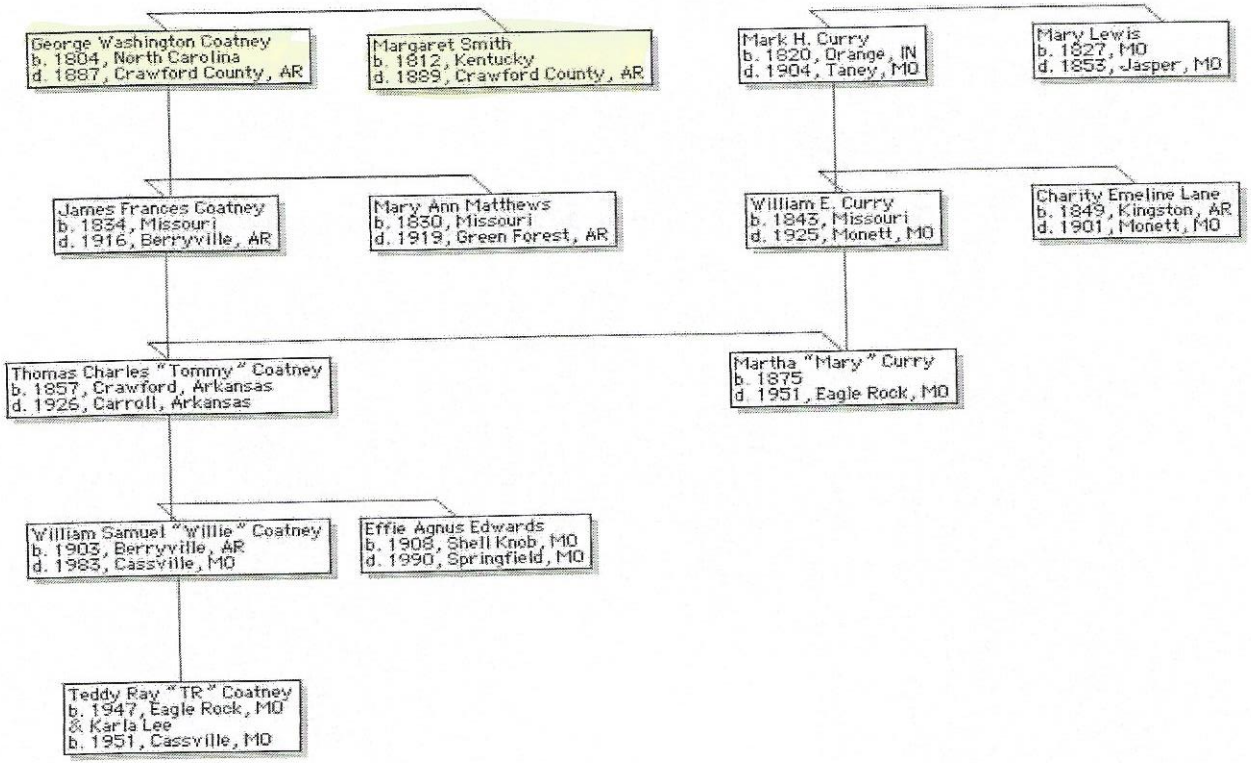
Acknowledgments

I want to thank my dear wife, Karla, for helping me keep track of my many piles and stacks and pieces of paper, as I have trouble remembering where I put anything, and she will lovingly attest to the fact that my exceptional long-term memory makes up for all other shortcomings.

I also wish to unabashedly thank James Coatney, my heroic great grandfather, for his role in preserving the Union and the courage he showed in the harshest of places, during the most restless of times, in our nation's history.

And I want to thank J. K. Phillips for doing a wonderful job piecing together my great grandfather's cherished war stories - a 40-year dream come true! And for the time she sacrificed away from family, while working on this project. Without her help, my great grandfather's stories would have surely been lost forever. Now that the project is complete, after weeks and months of countless e-mails, sending and receiving messages on a daily basis, I feel I am about to depart from a dear friend.

Finally I want to acknowledge God's awesome grace and mercy in allowing me this place in time to strike this highly personal record in honor of my extraordinary forefathers.


George Washington Coatney
b. 1804, North Carolina
d. 1887, Crawford County, AR
Margaret Smith
b. 1812, Kentucky
d. 1889, Crawford County, AR
Mark H. Curry
b. 1820, Orange, IN
d. 1904, Taney, MO
Mary Lewis
b. 1827, MO
d. 1853, Jasper, MO
James Frances Coatney
b. 1834, Missouri
d. 1916, Berryville, AR
Mary Ann Matthews
b. 1830, Missouri
d. 1919, Green Forest, AR
William E. Curry
b. 1843, Missouri
d. 1925, Monett, MO
Charity Emeline Lane
b. 1849, Kingston, AR
d. 1901, Monett, MO
Thomas Charles "Tommy" Coatney
b. 1857, Crawford, Arkansas
d. 1926, Carroll, Arkansas
Martha "Mary" Curry
b. 1875
d. 1951, Eagle Rock, MO
William Samuel "Willie" Coatney
b. 1903, Berryville, AR
d. 1983, Cassville, MO
Effie Agnus Edwards
b. 1908, Shell Knob, MO
d. 1990, Springfield, MO
Teddy Ray "TR" Coatney
b. 1947, Eagle Rock, MO
& Karla Lee
b. 1951, Cassville, MO

Chapter 1

My Coatney family came to Missouri from North Carolina by way of Great Great Grandfather George Washington Coatney, who was born in North Carolina in 1804. At the age of 16 George Coatney, displaying a strong pioneering spirit, left home on foot, ending up in Tennessee, living among the Cherokee Indians. While with the Cherokee, he learned his lifelong tanning trade and married a Cherokee girl named Margaret Smith - it being common for the Cherokee to adopt the names and ways of white people they liked.

Shortly after their first child, Elizabeth, was born in 1832, George and Margaret Coatney left Tennessee for Missouri, where my Great Grandfather James and his brother William were born. It is believed that the departure from Tennessee was to escape the impending Cherokee removal and infamous "Trail of Tears," because Margaret was a part of the Smith family related to Fly Smith, a Cherokee leader who died on the forced march into what was the new Indian Territory of the Five Civilized Tribes, and is today the great State of Oklahoma.

Finally, in 1838 the family moved to Crawford County in northwest Arkansas, where George died in 1887, followed by Margaret in 1889.

In the 1830s, there weren't many people in Crawford County, and everything was relatively peaceful until 1860. Then the wind of war was in the air, and the Coatneys, being solidly Union, suddenly became outcasts in the once friendly area, with extreme political excitement turning even the best of friends and families against each other.

Great Grandfather said before the war started many northwest Arkansas and southwest Missouri folks were pro-Union, but when politicians and preachers started giving

speeches, rallying support for the southern cause, the masses turned toward the Confederacy. However, those who continued supporting the Union remained strong in their conviction.

By 1862 many in northwest Arkansas endured much hatred for remaining loyal to the Union, even being run out of their churches and away from their homes, especially after the Union army defeated Arkansas' General Price on the hilly fields outside of Bentonville during the Battle of Pea Ridge on March 6-8, 1862. The general's overwhelming popularity is so described in the annuls of *Confederate Military History*:

> *General Price was greatly beloved in Arkansas. His natural amiability, his unassuming, fatherly dignity, recognized in the sobriquet of "Pap", his honesty and superb bravery, and untiring energy and devotion to the cause, made him a popular idol. Wherever he became accessible, the ladies called to see him, and the most enthusiastic kissed him, as he sat to give them a reception. The little girls he took upon his knee.* [1]

On the other hand, in his collection of writings about the border conflict, Lieutenant Colonel A. W. Bishop of the First Arkansas Union Cavalry expressed great disdain for Sterling Price, blaming him in part for the "veritable tug of war" that existed on the Missouri/Arkansas border:

> *He* [the Union man of the Border] *had prospered in his way, and though poor, it is true, could hunt without fear, and eat his corn bread and bacon in quiet. His more ambitious neighbor in the valley below could not discover any power in secession to render his crops more abundant than they had been.*
>
> *The fear of negro equality had never disturbed him, and he was very certain that the Government of the United States had thus far permitted him to be the architect of his own fortunes...*

Sterling Price,[2] *with the executive co-operation of Claiborne F. Jackson*[3] *to justify him, and possessing also, in small degree the confidence of the people of south-western Missouri, had raised an army of State Guards, ostensibly, but rebels at heart, who after a few months of hypocrisy, became well-ordered, if not disciplined, foes of the Government.* [4]

It was early 1862, and my Great Grandfather James and his brother William were cutting wood for their parents' fireplace when a group of men rode up and insisted they join the Confederates, "or be hanged." Two of the men went by the name Oliver and "were very likeable before the war." [5]

Showing mercy, the Confederate recruiters allowed the Coatney brothers time to slip inside the house to tell their parents they were being forced to join the Confederate Army. But after a short absence, James and William Coatney returned with guns drawn, along with their father, George, declaring they would not join the Rebels and, "If you choose to hang us, three of you won't be watching, because we're going to start firing."

At which point the Rebel gang made a hasty retreat, certain to return.

References

1. "The Battle of Elkhorn Tavern," *Confederate Military History*, vol. 10, chap. 4. Source: http://www.civilwarhome.com/CMHelkhorntavern.htm.
2. In 1853 Sterling Price was elected governor of Missouri and served until 1857. Although initially opposed to secession, he took command of the Missouri State Guard in 1861.
3. Claiborne Fox Jackson was elected governor of Missouri after serving in the state legislature. A strong secessionist, he organized the Missouri State Home Guard under the command of Sterling Price to resist Federal "coercion" and advocated the state join the Confederacy.

4. A. W. Bishop, *Loyalty on the Frontier, Sketches of Union Men of the Southwest with Incidents and Adventures in Rebellion on the Border* (p. 9), ed. Allen Scott, The University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, 2003.
5. Frank Oliver was a leader of the Crawford County Home Guard, with the power to issue arrest warrants for anyone resisting the Confederate movement. "From a partially reconstructed roster of men who rode with the Oliver band of irregulars in northwest Arkansas, six bear the name of Oliver. Frank Oliver apparently had three sons who were captured by a Union guerilla band led by Jess Morton and tortured for information on the whereabouts of their father." *Loyalty on the Frontier*, p. 201, fn. 10.

Chapter 2

As the Confederate movement remained a constant threat, the Coatneys knew they could no longer idly stand by. They knew if they stayed, it was kill or be killed. So they conspired with four longtime friends, the Gilstrap brothers, who were commissioned to organize a group to go to Springfield, Missouri, intent on joining the Union army.[1] Though Cassville was closer, the Coatneys chose instead to travel with the Gilstraps to Springfield, where James Coatney's in-laws lived and were able to harbor family, like many in Springfield who took in countless refugees when the war broke out.

Christopher Rein explains in his thesis on the trans-Mississippi army that

> *Confederates had attempted to prevent the removal of loyal Arkansans to northern states, especially after the April, 1862 passage of the Conscription Act, requiring all able-bodied males between 18 and 45 to serve in the army. Union men who initially declined to volunteer were placed under suspicion and often harassed by their pro-southern neighbors. Many, including a number of those who would later serve in the First Arkansas Cavalry, attempted to resist, either individually or in Union Leagues, but were eventually driven from their homes, and streamed northward into Missouri.* [2]

Dad said George Coatney and Mr. Gilstrap, Senior, got in a fistfight over the war. Apparently Mr. Gilstrap didn't like their joining the Union ranks. Nevertheless, James and William prepared to go to Springfield, taking their parents George and Margaret with them out of Crawford County, and away from danger. James also took his wife (Mary Ann Matthews

Coatney) and his five-year-old son Tommy, my grandfather. However, en route to Springfield, they were stopped by Rebel scouts and turned back at the Missouri state line.

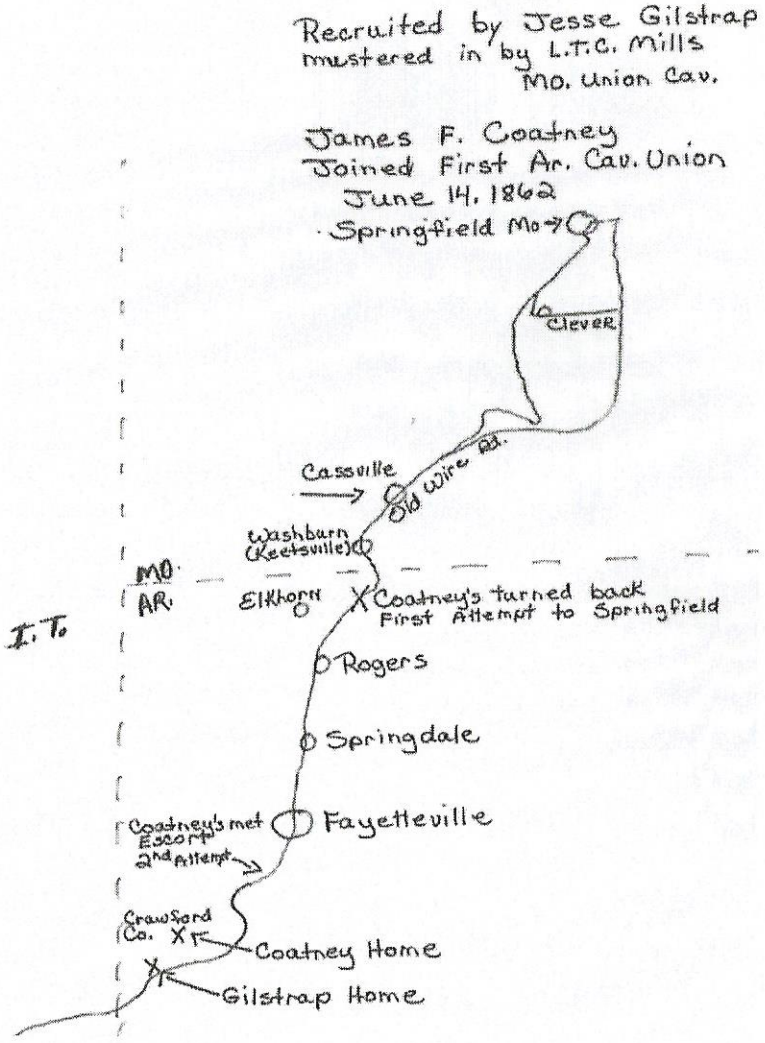
Convinced they were too well known as Union supporters to make the trip alone, the Gilstrap boys recruited four friends to help escort them out of Crawford County, fleeing across the state line and into Springfield in two groups, the Coatney group and the Gilstrap group. One of those friends was Wes Gilstrap's brother-in-law, a bold young zealot by the name of Jacob Yows (also spelled, Yoes), who the Coatney brothers previously worked with in the Granby lead mines, and who would later serve as their sergeant in the Great War Between the States.

Thus the Coatneys were escorted out of Crawford County through Cassville, following the telegraph lines along the "old wire road" which ran from Fort Smith to Springfield. George drove a team and wagon, hauling only the bare necessities. The women and my grandfather Tommy rode in the wagon. James and William followed on horseback, hiding in the woods by day, and traveling at night.

Finally arriving in Springfield, the two Coatney brothers were assigned to the First Arkansas Cavalry in June of 1862, and about two weeks later, with no formal training, they were encamped east of Cassville, Missouri, the county seat of Barry County.

Fortunately, the Coatney brothers grew up loving to hunt like their father George, having lived in Crawford County from the time they were two and four years of age. Growing up as backwoodsmen prepared them well for the time they would hunt down fleeing Rebels and flush out murderous bushwhackers while riding for the Union Cavalry.

There was a time when James Coatney and his brother William were so well known for their shooting skills that a bushwhacker offered $500.00 to anyone who would bring them to him, "dead or alive," - this according to a former bushwhacker who came to buy leather from their father, George, after the war.



AR: **Arkansas**
I.T.: **Indian Territory (Oklahoma)**
MO: **Missouri**
L.T.C: **Lieutenant Colonel**

On September 21, 1862, with Jesse Gilstrap as Captain, Company D joined another unit led by Captain Worthington, with orders to run the Rebels out of Cassville, where Confederates had taken over the two-story brick courthouse, using it as headquarters and fortress.

The Union brigade rode into Cassville expecting a big battle, but James Coatney said, "The Rebs were so over-powered, only a few tried to make a battle of it, with the notorious Rebel leader Colonel Alexander Hawthorne being the first to leave. The few that chose to fight were soon killed or captured. Many thought it safer to run and hide in the hills than try to get away on horseback.

"We rode around Cassville, flushing Rebels out of hiding and capturing about 40 horses for the First Arkansas. Meanwhile, the womenfolk were cheerfully bringing us food and milk and thanking us for what we were doing because, besides burning the courthouse and other buildings, the women said the Rebs were very disrespectful."

After retreating, the Confederates left the Barry County Courthouse in bad shape with virtually all contents destroyed, though it was later discovered a loyal citizen had squirreled away valuable court papers in a nearby cave for safekeeping until after the war. *Goodspeed's 1888 History of Barry County* gives credit to William Hubbert, a former court clerk; "*...now residing at Berryville, Ark., (Hubbert) moved the county records to Arkansas, and placed them in a cave on Butler's Creek, taking them out after the war.*" [3]

Some of those records are now available to the public, as confirmed by popular historian and former Missouri State Senator Emory Melton, who writes, "*During the Civil War, county records, many of which may be seen and examined today, were hidden in a cave southeast of Cassville and kept there until the close of the war.*" [4]

References

1. "Jesse M. Gilstrap was a miller in the Narrows (present-day Mountainburg). Jesse and his three brothers were all Unionists, though their father did not share their sentiments. Jesse raised one of the first companies for the First Arkansas Cavalry (U.S.), which became Company D under his captaincy. His brother Thomas John Gilstrap became first lieutenant of the company. Jesse was discharged in 1863, but he survived the war to serve briefly in the state legislature before his death in 1866. Jesse was also brother-in-law to Reuben Beele Burrows, a private of Company A, First Arkansas Cavalry (U. S.), who was killed in the Battle of Fayetteville." (*Loyalty on the Frontier,* p. 211, fn. 33)
2. Christopher Michael Rein, *Trans-Mississippi Southerners in the Union Army, 1862-1865* (p. 107). M.A. Thesis, Louisiana State University, 2001.
3. *Goodspeed's 1888 History of Barry County* , p. 66.
4. Emory Melton,"Civil War Days in Barry County," *White River Historical Quarterly*, vol. 5, # 1 (Fall 1973), p. 10.