

## John Conrad Roeder (1836-1905)

John C. Roeder was born in Nordeck, Germany in about 1836. He was the son of Conrad and Elizabeth Roeder. While there is little information about his early life, it is known that he was educated in Germany and immigrated to North America in 1854. He first worked as a lumberman in Canada and then on a sea vessel on the Great Lakes.<sup>1</sup> Finally, he moved to McLean County, Illinois in 1855. He then settled in Bloomington, IL two years later. While in Bloomington, he first worked in a hardware store. He then engaged in the grocery business, a trade he would sustain for twenty-five years of his life.<sup>2</sup>

On April 12, 1861 the Civil War began, in what would be a four year battle amongst states, families, and friends. Not long after the start of the war, John received a letter from a fellow German countryman about an opportunity to enlist in a Union army unit made up of German immigrants in St. Louis, Missouri. So in December of 1861, Roeder heeded that call to arms and traveled to Missouri. He joined Company K of the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment Missouri Volunteer Cavalry. Roeder and his unit largely served in Northwestern Missouri protecting Union soldiers and supporters and hunting down guerrillas. In a personal account given by John Roeder, he reflected on the work of guerrilla soldiers:

*“Man hunting, an occupation as old as the human race is the most exciting business in which one can engage. Man’s wit is pitted against man and there is always the ever present sense of danger. Perhaps the most exciting of all is hunting guerrillas. If a soldier is captured by regular troops, his life is sacred in the hands of his captors, but guerrillas are outside the protection of the laws of wars; if captured they are liable to be shot, and they in return make short shrift of their captives. It is a war to the knife and the knife to the hilt and no quarters asked or expected by either side.”<sup>3</sup>*

Guerrilla warfare was an unconventional style of fighting where men would band together and attack both Union soldiers and Union sympathizers throughout the border and southern states. The term “guerrilla” comes from the Spanish meaning “little war.” Confederate guerrillas would carry out hit and run attacks, raids, and ambushes against Union forces and towns. They would then quickly disband and melt away into the hills and reunite later.<sup>4</sup> The men that made up the guerrilla forces were native to Missouri and were familiar with roads, paths, houses, and farms; unlike the majority of Union soldiers who were not from the area. Roeder recalled that when the guerrilla fighters were “hard pressed, they dispersed to their homes and became innocent farmers, neutral, and if need be, Union sympathizers...but the moment our backs were turned they were again in the saddle, harrying union men, attacking our weak outposts, killing any stray soldiers they might find, and when they could not find Union men, they robbed and plundered the Southern Sympathizers.”<sup>5</sup>

Some guerrilla fighters were officially employed by the Confederate government as “Partisan Rangers,” or groups of citizens who organized themselves in companies that were

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<sup>1</sup> “Ends his own Life, *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> Newton Bateman, Paul Selby, Ezra Prince, and John H. Burnham. *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County, Volume II*. (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Co., 1908) p. 1268

<sup>3</sup> John C. Roeder, “Hunting Guerillas,” McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>4</sup> David K. March, *History of Missouri Vol. II*, (Lewis Historical Publishing Company: New York, 1967) p.921

<sup>5</sup> Roeder, “Hunting Guerillas”

independent of the regular army but were still charged with arming themselves and to serve in part of the district which they belonged to.<sup>6</sup> Still others were little more than bandits and outlaws looking to profit from either side.<sup>7</sup> The most infamous of these outlaws and bandits were the Quantrill and James-Younger gangs.

In December of 1861, the conditions in Northwestern Missouri became intolerable. The guerillas had become a brutal force destroying property and taking the lives of farmers and citizens who supported the Union. The guerrilla operations became so volatile that the United States government raised an effort to quell the forces. The most common technique employed was to establish small posts in major towns throughout the regions affected by guerrilla warfare. Separate forces of troops (such as Roeder's regiment) were also created to either supplement troops already in the field or relieve combat units. These new regiments were to conduct counter-guerrilla raids, patrols, and sweeps in an effort to defeat and drive guerrillas out of the areas. The U.S. government also stationed soldiers along railroads, bridges, and other critical locations as well. As the war raged on, U.S. government policies became increasingly harsher towards guerrilla activities in so much as any person caught conducting sabotage or thought to be a guerrilla fighter would be considered an outlaw and would be shot on sight.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after Roeder had joined Company K, his company received news of a new outcrop of "bushwacking," (a slang term for guerrilla activity) near Warrington, MO. Roeder and his company engaged in scouting for guerrilla activity for a 50 mile radius around Warrington. His company arrived in Warrington on Christmas Day of 1861. In their patrols of the area they found that "many of the best residences had been burned, stores of Union men plundered, horses stolen, and Union men, especially German, killed" in atrocious manners.<sup>9</sup> Even though the area had been thoroughly plundered, Roeder and his company cleared the guerrillas out of the area.

On another such march, Roeder's company captured a guerrilla who had attacked a wagon full of soldiers and two other "well known bushwhackers."<sup>10</sup> However, two of the outlaws escaped and one was killed. After that incident, the area seemed to be rid of guerrillas and Roeder's company was then ordered to Troy, MO (twenty miles away) where trouble was brewing. Once again, Company K successfully secured the town and drove all rebel sympathizers from the area.<sup>11</sup>

In May of 1862 Roeder's company moved further south to Rolla, MO where they were to escort a wagon train to Springfield, MO. In Roeder's words: "One day a gang of 200 bushwhackers attacked our train...that night a squad of our company captured 12 of them...that evening we heard squad firing and a soldier of our company told me that all the guerrillas, had all been killed, while trying to escape."<sup>12</sup> Whether or not those men had been trying to escape remains a mystery. It was common practice for guerrilla fighters to be shot on site after they had been captured by Union forces.

Roeder also recalled an instance when he was by himself watering his horse at a nearby spring and he heard someone running towards him. He pulled his revolver out and ordered the

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<sup>6</sup> "The Missouri Partisan Ranger- Confederate Partisan Act in Missouri,"

[http://www.rulen.com/partisan/part\\_act.htm](http://www.rulen.com/partisan/part_act.htm)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jcs-group.com/military/war1861guerrilla.html>

<sup>8</sup> "The Guerrilla War," <http://www.jcs-group.com/military/war1861guerrilla.html>

<sup>9</sup> Roeder, "Hunting Guerrillas"

<sup>10</sup> Roeder, "Hunting Guerrillas"

<sup>11</sup> Roeder, "Hunting Guerrillas"

<sup>12</sup> Roeder, "Hunting Guerrillas"

man to stop. He took him prisoner and then proceeded to escort him back to camp. After returning to camp with his prisoner, the man was allowed to take the oath of allegiance to the Union (instead of being executed) and was released.<sup>13</sup>

In less than five months in service, Roeder and the men of Company K made 14 expeditions and marched 1195 miles. During those expeditions they took 222 prisoners and killed 13.<sup>14</sup>

After serving nine months, John C. Roeder mustered out of the Union army on October 18, 1862 when he was honorably discharged. Less than a year later, on July 12, 1863, he married Mary Dolcater in Springfield, IL. Mary was born in Prussia, Germany on July 13, 1843 to Jasper and Eliza Dolcater. It is not known when Mary and her family came to Illinois. John and Mary Roeder had nine children, seven of whom grew to adulthood (William, Edwin, Hattie, Walter, Paul, Samuel, and Clarence H).<sup>15</sup> John and his wife were also members of the Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>16</sup>

After returning to Bloomington, he took up his former occupation as a grocer. His shop was first located on Oak Street near his home and then later was located on Market Street. He was a very outspoken supporter of the prohibition of alcohol. He attended prohibitionist meetings and at at-least one meeting, gave a rousing speech in support of Charles Capen who was a candidate to be appointed to the Illinois State prohibition convention. In his speech he called down the “wrath of God upon all prohibitionists who would vote for anyone who was not heart and soul with them.”<sup>17</sup>

On November 4, 1905, John and Mary were in the sitting room of their home, located at 408 N. Oak Street. Mary left the room to retire to the other side of the house. Shortly before the noon hour, a shot rang out followed by the sound of a body falling. Mary ran to the room she had just left and found John on the floor, revolver in hand, and blood flowing from his head. After she called for help, Mary fainted at the sight of her husband lying dead on the floor. Authorities believe the suicide was caused by temporary insanity brought on by suffering both mentally and physically. John’s pastor had seen John just days before and believed he was unusually depressed since he had been confined to his house for many years because of illness. But, no one saw anything that led them to believe he would take his own life. Roeder was 69 years old at the time of his death.<sup>18</sup> Although he took his own life, Roeder was remembered as a man of intelligence, ability, and also for his valiant service in the Civil War and his service to his community.<sup>19</sup> He was buried next to one of his children who had preceded him in death at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

By: Emily Swartz, 2011

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<sup>13</sup> Roeder, “Hunting Guerrillas”

<sup>14</sup> Roeder, “Hunting Guerrillas”

<sup>15</sup> Bateman, Selby, Prince, and Burnham, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County, Volume II*, p.1268

<sup>16</sup> Bateman, Selby, Prince, and Burnham, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County, Volume II*, p.1268

<sup>17</sup> “The Prohibitionists: The County and City Conventions of the Prohibition Party are Held in this City,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 30, 1892

<sup>18</sup> “Ends his own Life”

<sup>19</sup> Bateman, Selby, Prince, and Burnham, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County, Volume II*, p.1268