

**John Conrad Roeder** (abt. 1836 – Nov. 4, 1905)

In the early years of the Civil War, all soldiers were volunteers who answered their country's call to fight to save the union. Since they were volunteers, they could enlist in the unit of their choice. Many companies were formed entirely with men from a certain town, county, or state. A number of companies were also formed by men of the same ethnic background. Most frequently these were German or Irish immigrants wanting to support their new country. John Roeder belonged to such a unit.

John Conrad Roeder was born in Nordeck, Germany in about 1836. He was educated in Germany and immigrated to North America in 1854 when he was eighteen. He first worked as a lumberman in Canada and then served on a sea vessel on the Great Lakes. He moved to McLean County in 1855 and settled in Bloomington two years later. Here, he first worked in a hardware store, then began a career in the grocery business which would be his trade for the next 25 years of his life.

Shortly after the Civil War began, John received a letter from a fellow German countryman telling him of a unit being formed in St. Louis, MO of German immigrants. In December of 1861, John traveled to St. Louis and joined Company K of the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment Missouri Volunteer Calvary.

Missouri was a border state. It was still in the Union, but many of its citizens were Southern sympathizers and wanted to join the Confederacy. Bands of guerilla fighters roamed the countryside, brutally destroying property and taking the lives of farmers and citizens who supported the Union. These guerillas 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. The men with the guerilla forces were native to Missouri and were familiar with the countryside. This was a definite advantage against Union soldiers who did not know the territory. Roeder later recalled that when guerilla 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, attaching our weak outposts and killing any stray soldiers they might find." Things became so bad by December of 1861, that the United States government created special regiments to conduct counter-guerilla activities, and drive them out of the area. Company K was part of one such unit.

Shortly after Roeder joined Company K, they received news of "bushwacking," guerilla activity near Warrington, MO. They arrived there Christmas Day and found "many of the best residences had been burned, stores of Union men plundered, horses stolen, Union men, especially Germans, killed." Company K successfully cleared the area of guerillas. Later, he reflected on this type of fighting: "Guerillas 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."

Roeder's unit moved onto Troy, MO, then to Rolla, and then Springfield, MO. He remembered: "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 guerillas had been killed while trying to escape." Whether or not those men had been trying to escape is unknown. It was common for guerillas to be shot on site when captured by Union forces.

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

John was honorably discharged on October 18, 1862 after nine months in service. In the early years of the war, enlistments were frequently short term as the war was expected to be of short duration. John then returned to Bloomington, where he again worked as a grocer. Less than a year later, he married Mary Dolcater in Springfield, IL. Mary had also emigrated from Germany. They would have nine children.

John and Mary belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church. John also became an outspoken supporter of the prohibition of alcohol. He attended prohibitionist meetings and once gave a rousing speech in support of Charles Capen, a prohibitionist candidate for the United State senate.

Sadly, in 1905, John committed suicide at his home at 408 N. Oak St. He was 69. He had been confined to his home for many years by illness and was depressed by continual physical and mental suffering. Although he took his own life, Roeder was remembered as a man of intelligence, ability, and valiant service to his country and community. He is buried next to one of his children in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

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**Discussion Question:** Are there rules for war? Can you think of any? Why should guerillas be considered “outside” the rules?