

# Company Aytch

By Rod Fraser

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Sam Watkins was just 21, when his state left the Union to join the Confederate States of America. Initially Tennessee had mixed feelings about succession. But when Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers on April 15, 1861 to preserve the Union by force, the Tennessee state legislature voted to join its southern neighbours. This decision was confirmed by a 2 to 1 majority in a plebiscite

the following month.

The *Confederacy* initially consisted of South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas. When the war with the United States started in earnest in April of 1861, four other states of the upper south (Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia) joined them. This led to four years of civil war and the death of over 620,000 Americans.

In May of 1861, Sam joined the First Tennessee Infantry Regiment, determined to fight the Union army. He became part of Company H (or Company 'Aytch' as he put it).

Over the next four years of the Civil War, Sam was involved in many of its significant battles and small skirmishes, largely in the west. Ken Burns' brilliant documentary of this conflict, contained many of Sam's numerous observations of the war.

It turns out Sam Watkins maintained a journal of his war experiences, and in the early 1880s, published a series of newspaper articles on his war years. Unlike other memoirs of the civil war, this one was written from the perspective of a private soldier. He wanted to "tell of the fellows who did the shooting and killing ... drilling and standing guard, [all] for

eleven dollars a month and rations”.

Sam did a good job on his newspaper columns. He wrote in a simple, straightforward style, often taking care to remind his readers that his articles were not a history of the war, but merely a tale of a common soldier’s observations about the war.

One story Sam told was of a visit by his father at Chattanooga in 1863. He and his fellow soldiers were living on parched corn at the time. Embarrassed at having nothing but this dismal fare to offer his father for dinner, he introduced his Dad to the regimental commander, hoping he and his father might be invited to a decent meal.

The senior officer obliged and the three of them sat down at the table. A cook spooned their rations onto their plates. Sam recalled with shock and dismay, “He was living like us—on parched corn.”

For those who haven’t heard of parched corn, it was common enough in the civil war years. It involved taking corn kernels, drying them in the sun for a long time, then heating them in a frying pan.

Alternatively dried corn could be pounded into a powder with a mortar. The powder was then carried by soldiers in a bag. When mixed with water, it was easily boiled into a porridge, or baked into small

cakes. It was very common fare in those times.

If the soldiers were lucky and had some butter and salt, the dish wasn't bad. Dried corn kept well and wasn't perishable. But by itself, and eaten too often, it really was an uninspired dinner. No wonder Sam was disappointed.



Some of the anecdotes in Sam's memoir are like the above story—amusing and lighthearted. But there are other somber tales of the hardships of camp life and the horrors of battle. One story described Sam's code of fighting, "I always shot at privates.... They did the killing," he recalled, "I always tried to kill those that were trying to kill me."

His newspaper articles were well received by veterans and other people interested in the war. Many of them asked Sam to compile the articles in a book and he did just that. 2,000 copies were printed. *Company Aytch* was published in 1882 when Sam was 43 years of age.

The books sold quickly and became a coveted item in the homes of many veterans. Years later, Sam rewrote his book, improving it where he could, hoping for a second print run of 2,000 copies.

Unfortunately this didn't come to pass. The hardships of the war eventually caught up to him. Sam died when he was 62.

Although Sam was an ordinary soldier, his parents had the wherewithal to send him to Jackson College where he appears—based on the clarity of his writing— to have received a good education. In the years leading up to the civil war, Sam earned his living working as a store clerk. He was one of seven survivors (out of 120) from the original Company H.

His children recalled—when their father wrote *Company Aytch*, in the cold of morning with his stub of a pencil—he would sometimes break into laughter as he pondered a memory of the war years.

They didn't mind that so much; that was just Dad recalling the old days. What bothered them was Sam putting his head on his hands atop the table and sobbing inconsolably. When I heard this account of Sam's life, it made me like him all the more.



In addition to enjoying Sam's memoir, his life story had an impact on me in one small way. It turns out the title was an amusing source of conversation with my brother.

Drew said he pronounced the letter 'H' much as Sam did. 'Aytch' made phonetic sense to Drew. I tried to apply the same reasoning, but I just couldn't get it to work.

So I consulted Webster's dictionary and learned that 'aitch' or 'aytch' is a modern spelling of the letter 'H'. It is pronounced 'āch', where ā is a long 'a'—as in ape, say, etc. That worked for me.



Sam Watkins' book, *Company Aytch*, is still in print—a little over 135 years after it was first printed. Other authors can only hope to do as well.

February 28, 2018