

Jonathan Mize killed Guarding Courthouse

By Carroll McMahan

When the Civil War erupted, William Holland Thomas felt the citizens in the isolated mountains of his native western North Carolina would fare better as part of the Confederacy than they had in the United States. He was appointed the rank Colonel in the Confederate Army and rallied companies of men to fight with him.

Col. Thomas, who was adopted into the Cherokee tribe by Yonaguska and appointed chief of the Quallatown Cherokee when the great chief died, had no trouble soliciting both white and Cherokee troops. The force he formed was called Thomas's Legion.

In 1863 Thomas's Legion crossed the Smoky Mountains and occupied Gatlinburg. During their stay in Gatlinburg a few of Thomas' men, out on a scouting mission, were captured by the Federal Home Guard in Sevierville and thrown into a makeshift jail in the basement of the Sevier County Courthouse.

Col. Thomas was furious. Immediately rushing 200 men to Sevierville on December 8th, they surprised the guard, broke open the jail and released the prisoners. He captured 60 Federal Home Guards, six regular Federal Army soldiers as well as their guns and ammunition.

During the raid, Jonathan Mize, 59, and his 17-year-old son James Harold was guarding the Sevier County Courthouse along with several other Federal Home Guards. 6 men were shot, of which only two survived. Jonathan Mize was critically wounded and died on December 14th. His son James was wounded but survived.

Jonathan Mize lived on a big farm just a few miles south of Sevierville. His landholdings , located on the east side of the West Prong of the Little Pigeon River, stretched from acreage south of present day Governor's Crossing all the way northward to the spot where the Sevierville City Park is now located.

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Mize was born in Rockingham County, North Carolina in 1804. He moved to Tennessee and married Nancy Chambers on September 19, 1829 in Greene County. The couple later moved their growing family to Tuckaleechee Cove in Blount County before settling in Sevier County sometime in the 1850s.

Two of their sons, 32-year-old William Alexander and 24-year-old Rufus Lee enlisted together in Company K of the 2nd Tennessee Calvary. Their son John Clark, 25, enlisted in Company M while another son Robert joined Company G of the 3rd Tennessee Infantry.

Jonathan was considered too old to serve in the regular Army and his youngest son James Harold was too young.

The attending physician, J.W. Hammer, reported that he “attended Jonathan Mize after he was wounded by the Rebels and Indians in the town of Sevierville...and that his wound was a gunshot or pistol shot inflicted while engaged as National Guard under order of Major C. Inman.”

Jonathan Mize was laid to rest in the Middle Creek Methodist Church Cemetery.

All of his sons returned from the War, although Sergeant Rufus Lee was wounded in the shoulder at the Battle of Decatur, Alabama, Private John Clark was hospitalized in Michigan and Private Robert received severe eye injuries.

The following month after the raid by Thomas’s Legion, the Sevier County Courthouse was used as a hospital during the Battle of Fair Garden.

When the Federal troops in Knoxville received word of the alarming incident in Sevierville, Col. William Palmer with the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry was dispatched to recover the property taken by Thomas’s Legion.

Led by Col. Palmer, 150 Union soldiers headed from Wear’s Valley by mountain trails to Gatlinburg. A Wear’s Valley native, Reverend J.D. Lawson led them over

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Rich Mountain, down Laurel Branch, through Fighting Creek Gap and down Fighting Creek Gap to Gatlinburg.

Lieutenant Colonel C.D. Lamborn led 50 soldiers from Sevierville by way of Pigeon Forge. These two forces met in Gatlinburg and camped near the river where the Riverside Hotel was later built.

On the morning of December 20, 1863 the Union forces advanced on the blockhouse built by Col. Thomas on what was known as Burg Hill, near the spot where Andy Huff later built the Mountain View Hotel. A small skirmish ensued and the surprised Confederate forces fled toward Roaring Fork and Dudley Creek.

They hastily crossed the mountains toward their homes in North Carolina. A story circulated around Gatlinburg after their departure that Col. Thomas was in such a hurry to leave that he left his black hat on the table. The Union soldiers were delighted to have the hat as a souvenir.

Although a major battle was never fought on Sevier County soil, the Civil War was a very pivotal time in its history. As a stronghold for Union loyalist in a Confederate state, everyone was suspicious and cautious. It was not uncommon for a farm to be pillaged by both sides.

The raid on the courthouse by Thomas's Legion and the subsequent death of Jonathan Mize is only one tragic incident among many that occurred in Sevier County during the dark days of the Civil War.