



The Seventh West Virginia Infantry: An Embattled Union Regiment from the Civil War's Most Divided State by David W. Mellott and Mark A. Snell.

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Civil War historians unfairly neglect West Virginia, usually reducing its ordeals to a few sentences on its resistance to Virginia's secession at the beginning of the conflict. But, besides the travails of the thousands of its men serving on both sides in the war, it endured a guerrilla conflict paralleled in savagery only by Missouri's. In *The Seventh West Virginia Infantry*, Ohio lawyer David Mellott and historian Mark Snell¹ (Shepherd University) have crafted a welcome scholarly study of the fledgling state's banner regiment.

Recruited in 1861 from northwestern Virginia and neighboring counties in Ohio and Pennsylvania, "the Bloody Seventh" served with the Army of the Potomac through the major battles of the war's eastern theater. The book covers the regiment's experiences on and off the battlefield, and both during and after the war. The result is a thoroughly researched,² penetrating, and deftly written regimental history that should supersede the less rigorous popular works that have long dominated West Virginia's Civil War literature.

In chapter 1, the authors paint a clear statistical and demographic portrait of the men who joined each side in the war and explain why the new Seventh Virginia Union recruited in its three regions. In the book's other chapters, they draw on a massive new base of letters and diaries solicited from dozens of descendants, including Mellott himself. Some subjects, for instance slavery, receive less attention simply because soldiers rarely wrote about them.

Mellott and Snell give due consideration to the Seventh Virginia's front-line actions. After its initial deployment in its home territory protecting railroads, it was transferred by the War Department—against the desires of its officers and men—to the Army of the Potomac for operations in eastern Virginia. Major General George McClellan assigned the regiment to the Gibraltar Brigade along with Indiana and Ohio units. Together, they saw hard fighting in the Shenandoah Valley and then sustained heavy casualties in Bloody Lane at Antietam, where the Seventh lost three colorbearers but kept its tattered flag. They fought as well at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.

In their fine battle narratives, Mellott and Snell connect military events with both broader and narrower contexts of the regiment's existence, including West Virginia's acquisition of statehood despite the difficulties posed by, among other things, the critical issue of slavery. Like many of their fellow soldiers, the men of the Seventh men were cool to the news of the Emancipation Proclamation, even though West Virginia received an exemption. The authors' discussion of the soldiers' daily lives in camp, including desertions, alcohol use, gambling, religious matters, and draftees, helps to humanize them in ways neglected in previous regimental histories.

1. His *West Virginia and the Civil War: Mountaineers Are Always Free* (Charleston, SC: History Pr, 2011) was the first book on its subject by a professional historian in the past half century.

2. Snell has made good use of the extensive collection of census and enlistment data at the George Tyler Moore Center at Shepherd University, of which he is a former director.

Gettysburg proved to be the newly renamed Seventh West Virginia's crucible. The Gibraltar Brigade saw heavy action along east Cemetery Hill, described in vivid detail from the perspectives of its participants. In the following passage, the authors connect the views of a well-read senior officer with those of a less educated junior officer promoted from the ranks.

In the weeks, months, and years that followed, the Seventh's survivors came to know that they had been part of an epic encounter. Their monuments and markers erected on that field in the following forty years attest to that. But by the summer of 1863, the Seventh's veterans had become accustomed to hard fighting. Eli Henthorn, a lieutenant in Co. H., said as much when he wrote his sister almost a month and a half later, "I havent got mutch News to write only that I was in the Battle at Gettysburg. But got out Safe And thankful to the good Lord for it I think it was the hardest Battle that Ever has Ben Fought by the Army of the Potomac." [Colonel Jonathan] Lockwood simply called the three-day battle "the mighty contest for the mastery." Coupled with the fall of Vicksburg, on July 4, fought eight hundred miles away, the Battle of Gettysburg indeed marked a major turning point in the war. (145-46)

Such comparisons give the West Virginia soldiers a voice in their own history.

The book's final chapters concern the Seventh's last year of war. After refitting in central Virginia, its men sustained heavy casualties at the Wilderness, in the trenches of Petersburg, and during the pursuit to Appomattox. (The book's high-quality map program is a special enhancement here.) The authors enliven their battle analyses by quoting letters of soldiers in other units who recalled seeing the Seventh in action. They describe periods when no fighting took place. We learn about bounty jumpers, members of the Seventh imprisoned in Andersonville, and even the regimental band.

The Seventh's troubles did not end with Robert E. Lee's surrender. The authors follow the unit through the Grand Review, its drawn-out discharge, and its men's return home to their new state. In a brief but interesting discussion, they describe the conservative reaction that spoiled the fruits of Union victory in the early 1870s. The book concludes with the struggles of the Seventh's veterans to cope with civilian daily life and preserve the memory of their service.

There are few flaws in this discerning and most salutary history of a little studied Civil War regiment from its inception to its disbandment.³ It deserves a place on the shelf beside other fine recent regimental histories.⁴

3. The home front receives slight attention due to the spotty available research on the subject. This is true of works on southwestern Pennsylvania and southeastern Ohio as well.

4. E.g., Lesley J. Gordon's *Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2014).