

CRY UNCLE, SUMBODY

a novel by
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PREFACE

David Longenecker's diary of 1864-65 has been in my possession for almost a half-century. Previous to that, it lay in an old train caboose jammed with whatnots and thig-a-ma-jigs, sitting on a farm in Indiana. I transcribed it over thirty years ago, but all my notes were either misplaced or lost. Nearly a year ago, I decided to transcribe David's diary once again. I felt compelled to tell his story.

David Longenecker was born on April 16, 1837 in Juniata County, Pennsylvania. He enlisted in the Union Army at Camp Piqua, Ohio and was assigned to Company G of the 110th Ohio Volunteer Infantry as a Private on August 19, 1862.

David was wounded twice—first in the Battle of the Wilderness in Virginia and again at the Battle of Monocacy Junction in Maryland where he was captured and eventually marched to and incarcerated in a southern prison, a converted tobacco house, located in Danville, Virginia.

David writes of his day-by-day struggle to survive. He even took time to pen some of his views of the politicians, as well as the politics that influenced the Civil War, of the Generals who planned and implemented it, and of the soldiers, both Union and Confederate, who gave their lives because of it.

David cites the horrific battles he fought in, the vile conditions of the prisons he was confined to, and the everyday lonesomeness, sickness, starvation, and fear that was a constant in the minds and on the bodies of the men and boys—young and old alike; the foot soldiers who died by the thousands upon thousands.

I believe that nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, David had something of consequence to say—a story waiting to be told. After all, he didn't only jot down weather

conditions, dates, and times in his diary; he also recorded personal activities, reflections, and emotions of both himself and his comrades. The common foot soldier fighting in the Civil War was under the most extreme hardship and suffering imaginable. David was part of its ever-tramping infantry.

Part I

1

In the spring, the fertile Ohio River Valley takes on the colors of a rainbow—each crop and grove making its own contribution, the entirety of the valley, starting with the disappearance of the last snow and ripening over the weeks from green to yellow like golden apples or corn. In this particular corner of the Ohio Valley, David's, a rambling brook on its way from the hills cuts through this smaller valley, twisting and turning until its fresh blue waters pool beneath a covered bridge, tarries there to look around, and then rolls down into the river and the life beyond. The bridge was built in 1836—the year David Longacher was born. The bridge is part of the clay road that passes the edge of a quarter section, the 160 acres of the Longacher farm.

A weathered two-story brick farmhouse situated upon one of the gentle slopes of the hills overlooks the valley. A full second story was a distinct rarity in the country when the house was built; and brick was hard to come by. The builder, David's father, had lived on the property as the house was constructed. Apparently, he didn't want prosperity to make him forget where his people had started, so he'd left the original log cabin intact a few yards away, not dismantled or burned. It was built sturdy, as the house was—it was the family's way—and remained still usable after it was no longer needed. In fact, for one willing to live without the amenities, it remained a comfortable cabin. Now, the farmhouse, itself, though impressive, is in need of minor repair. Missing roof shingles, runs of absent brick mortar, and a cracked window here and there await replacement or repair.

David Longacher, Sr. wasn't just missed in the hearts of his family with his passing. The effect of his hard work was lost and that loss was apparent throughout the Longacher land. When the elder Longacher died in the first Battle of Bull Run, one of the first of the Civil War, David, the faithful son, did what was required: he stepped away from his job—a well paying one—as a carpenter and brought his new wife with him from the city to the family farm. The farm was more than a place to him, more than a reminder of his family past. It embodied the values and virtues his father and grandfather had lived by and taught. David managed to bring in the first harvest after he arrived, though he had only a youthful experience with farming. A local man, Billy Perkins, whose family farm had been lost by his father after a string of unwise investments, had helped out both as a worker and instructor for David. Everything about the farm—the animals, the equipment, the hummocks and gullies reminded David of his father. And part of his struggle with the land was to let it know—to let himself know—that he was the new master, carrying on family traditions, but with a few of his own new ways of doing things.

December 1861

It was midday as David wiped off his feet upon entering the house. He'd shaken snow off of his coat outside and tucked it under his arm. He was tired and chilled to the bone and the thing that would cheer him and warm him, he knew, was the company of his sisters and his wife.

As he came in, Hannah startled. She wadded something up in her hands and tucked it behind herself, trying to look as though nothing had happened.

“What are you hiding there, Hannah?” David asked. His father had been a quiet, undemonstrative man and so David, now the man of the house, liked to play the tease, in contrast, for fun.

“Nothing,” Hannah said, rolling her eyes in mock innocence. She stretched, straightening her back, reaching behind herself to check that the mysterious object was well hidden.

David laid his coat across the back of a chair near the fire. He was going out again soon but he thought he might steam away a little of the moisture. This drying of coats was a science. Too near the fire and the cloth would get hot, perhaps even singe; too far away and it would still be wet the next day.

“Doesn’t look like no nothing to me,” he said to Hannah. “To me it looks more like what you might call a …” He stopped and squinted at the ceiling as if searching for the word. “It looks more to me like a … something.”

Hannah let lose an explosive little giggle, the giggle she’d had since childhood; she was afraid David would guess.

“Let me see,” he said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hannah said, straightening herself in the chair.

“You better show me, or you’re in for a good old-fashioned tickling.”

“It’s a surprise,” Nel interrupted. She knew that this was one of the Longacher’s teasing routines, but it made her nervous. It was an unfamiliar kind of game for her.

David turned to Nel, hoping to draw her in. “A surprise for who?”

“For you.” Nel was always the innocent bystander—and occasional referee—in these games between her husband and his sister. They’d been going at each other since Hannah was a child. When Nel had moved to the farm, it had amazed her that these two could carry on sometimes for as long as a day without anyone paying attention. Ma Longacher and Beth could sleep right through one of these battles, as Beth was doing right now.

David turned back to Hannah. “A surprise, is it?” He made as if to dislodge his sister from her chair. She shouldered him away.

“It’s a Christmas present,” she said.

“For who?” he asked again.

“It’s for you. You want to ruin your surprise?”

David paused. Hannah smiled. She had the advantage. David loved surprises.

“Well you must not love me very much,” David sighed.

“How did you guess?” she snickered.

Hannah always made him laugh. She was so dramatic, David thought, so changeable. Hannah herself didn’t know half the time whether she was kidding or not. It was what made her such a great partner in their teasing games.

“If you loved me, you’d be planning a big surprise for me. On the other hand, if you can hide something behind that skinny little butt of yours, it can’t be very big.”

“Maybe I’m not finished,” she responded. “Maybe this is only a tiny part of the Christmas surprise . . .” She paused to work up a monstrous exaggeration. “Perhaps the whole present is *so* big we can only bring it indoors part by part.”

“Such as a new wagon?”

“Such as.”

David looked her up and down, then walked over to the chair near the fireplace.

He reached down to brush the dew from his coat. “You better not poke yourself in the butt with that knitting needle,” he said.

She gasped in mock outrage. “I can’t believe you’d say something about your own sister’s butt … twice, I might add.” She couldn’t believe he had spotted the needle. “Tell him, Nel. He’s your husband. Tell him to mind his manners.”

Falling into the game, Nel scolded him. “It is rude, David, to mention the bottom of your own family member …”

“In polite conversation,” Hannah continued.

There was a meaningful silence amongst the three as David fetched himself a cup of water.

“Christmas you say,” he said as he came back into the room.

“You better get busy. It’s only a week away,” Hannah said.

“Christmas. Seems like it’s come early this year,” he said.

It was true. There was so much to be done. That lull in the work of the farm David remembered when he was a young boy—when school started, the years he went to school, had vanished when he took on the full responsibility of the farm.

“It’s the seventeenth of December today,” Nel said.

“Well, then, darn it. Come on girls, bundle up. It’s tree chopping time,” he said.
“Christmas is around the corner and nobody reminded me?”

“Beth has been reminding you about it for a month,” Nel said.

“That’s our Beth. She’d like to have Christmas about once a week.” David pulled his coat back on. The snow had melted from his boots. A small pool of water gathered by the hearth. “You want to come?”

“We were ready a half hour ago,” Hannah said. “... that is Nel and me.”

“Beth don’t want to go?”

“David, she’ll never forgive you if you leave her behind,” Nel said. And it was true.

“She’s still asleep,” Hannah said.

“I’ll wake her up,” Nel said, getting to her feet.

“No, no, no ...” David whispered as he motioned them to follow him upstairs. “Hannah, you and Nel pick up the end of Beth’s footboard. I’ll get the headboard. We’re going to take Sissy outside.”

Much as he loved teasing Hannah, it was a much greater pleasure to give his youngest sister a hard time. She, as a young girl, had taken her father’s death the hardest. Ma and friends and relatives had worried that she’d never get over it. One of David Sr.’s cousins—a woman who could find a cloud to cover even a happy event—said she believed that girls who lost their fathers early could never get over the loss, and that they never married happily. Ma dismissed the thought but she worried anyway.

Nel shivered. “It’s freezing out.”

“And snowing,” Hannah added, delighted. She had already thrown on her coat and boots.

“I didn’t say we were going to leave her outside,” David said as he pushed open the door to Beth’s room. He turned and put his finger to his lips.

“Oh my gosh, David, how childish. What kind of a patriarch are you going to be?” Hannah said.

“The best kind,” Nel said.

Hannah tiptoed to the double doors of the balcony and pulled them open. She turned to help Nel pick up the foot of the bed. David grabbed the headboard and gave the girls a nod. They took great pains not to shift the bed as the three carried the whole piece of furniture out the wide doors.

As the wet snowflakes fell onto sleeping Beth’s face, her eyelids fluttered open. “My land, have you all lost your wits?” Beth blurted out, wiping her eyes and pulling the quilt over her head. “Get me off this freezing porch, you, you ...”

David leaned back, hands on his waist, laughing.

“It’s not funny, David,” Beth mumbled from beneath the quilt.

“I’m going to get our gear together, my little darlings. Help our Beth get dressed and make sure she doesn’t dilly-dally,” David said. “Meet me at the old cabin.”

“You are crazy,” Beth said from beneath the quilt.

“Crazy maybe. But I’m going to get us a tree. If you prefer you can stay inside, Sissy, and keep warm.”

Beth threw back the quilt and jumped out of bed. “You wait right here,” she said as she stamped her foot.

“You girls wait for her,” David said. “I’ll swing ’round and get you.” He started down the stairs.

“David, put on your scarf,” Nel shouted after him.

“I can’t find it!”

“I told you so,” Hannah said to Nel, pleased that she’d thought to knit him a new one for Christmas.

The wait wasn’t necessary. On this day, Beth was ready in record time.

Even the old barn was solid. In a perfect world—in the winter in any case—it would have been a shorter walk from the house. But mindful of the smell and flies that were drawn to the animals, David Sr. had built the barn as far from the house as was practical.

David opened one of the barn doors wide, letting in some light. The animals lay on the straw, their sides pressed against one another, as far away as possible from the cold stable walls. The presence of these big beasts comforted David. He spoke out a couple of names, clicked his tongue in a language only he and they understood, and slapped his thigh. The younger mule Browny, eager to move about, got up right away; the older one, Andrew, who, from experience knew what was coming, brayed and took his time getting up.

Hannah and Nel, too excited to wait, followed behind Beth trying to stay in her footprints as she plodded ahead toward the barn through the deep snow.

David was finishing harnessing up the mules to the sleigh when the girls pushed through the other door. Beth came up behind David, reached up, and gave his hair a hard tug. “It wasn’t funny,” she said, eyeing David as he turned around.

“Sure it was ... at least for me.”

“No, pretending you’d go without me.”

“Oh, be a good sport, my pet, and I’ll let you be in charge of putting the angel on top the Christmas tree,” David said.

“That’s my job,” Hannah exclaimed.

“Since when?” Nel asked, giving Hannah a nudge.

Beth smiled as she turned to them and stuck out her tongue.

“It’s always been my job,” Hannah pouted.

“Traditionally, the job of putting the angel on the top of the tree goes to the one who is purest of heart,” Nel said.

David looked over at Nel. “Is that true?”

“It’s traditional,” Nel said.

“And to think that for all these years we let Hannah, with her little black heart, put the angel up there. And now Beth.”

“I do not have a black heart,” Beth frowned.

“Of course you don’t,” David said, hugging her. “Yours is a heart of gold.” David winked at Hannah. She smiled as she shook her head.

Since the death of their father, David had taken over as head of the Longacher dynasty, such as it was. Of course, David placed himself in charge of the usual practical family business—the management of the farm, provisioning the household, prioritizing repairs, and assisting and supporting Ma who was delegated the responsibility of making major financial decisions and overseeing the girls’ education. He also assumed his father’s tendency to indulge the baby of the family. Even more playful than his father, David had stepped into his father’s role. He never stopped kidding around with Beth, as his way of

reminding her how much she was loved. Beth expected that same attention from the entire household.

Climbing down from the sleigh, David, his wife—barely more than a child herself—and his kid sisters scampered down to a small stand of evergreen trees at the far end of their property. David had been eyeing one for the last several months. It was at the edge and was taller than he was—more tree than the house could handle. Perfect to cut off the bottom for their Yule log. But Beth insisted on choosing the tree herself and Hannah and Nel recommended one bad choice after another—one too short, one too bent or too scrawny. In the end, they all settled on the very tree David had planned to cut in the first place. Then it was several hearty swings of the ax and the tree was down on the ground. They loaded it onto the sleigh and headed the mules back toward the house.

They left the tree on the porch and David sent the girls back inside before returning the mules to the barn. Both animals brayed at being put back. They'd gone to the trouble of rousing themselves only to make one short haul and then were retired again. Andrew fought David as he removed the halter. Browny backed away, kicking. *Mules*, David thought. *What's more stubborn?*

"I guess that's why they call you two mulish," he said. "You're so doggone hard-headed." David pulled a carrot from his pocket and divided it. He watched the animals toss their heads as they devoured it.

Ma Longacher had already replenished the fire blazing in the fireplace by the time David returned to the house. Beth and Hannah, tired from their adventure and the cold, huddled near the hearth. Nel was busy helping Ma in the kitchen.

“Hmm, what’s that I smell?” David said as he walked into the kitchen and wrapped his arms around his mother’s waist.

“Pumpkin pies,” Ma Longacher said. “And don’t you be poking your finger in them.”

“But Ma, they’re my favorite.”

“They won’t be fit to eat until they’ve set,” Ma said.

“But what if … what if …” David searched for the argument. “What if a … if *something* should fall on my head and I’d died without pie?”

Ma wondered for the hundredth time what she’d ever done to give birth to such a silly boy.

“I don’t like you to talk that way, David,” Nel said.

All the laughter went out of his eyes. Nel could get touchy. She’d lost her mother when she was only a few years old. David and Ma and the girls were the first complete family she’d had in her entire life. She needed to count on them. She was an only child and David had begun to understand that it took motherless children a long time to get over their fears of disaster.

“I’m just pulling Ma’s leg,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“I bet you’re thinking about the other smell,” Ma said, eager to change the subject. “… Besides the pie.”

“You tell me,” David said.

"I'm not sure I should," Ma said. "I should run the likes of you out of the kitchen for taking away all my help."

"Smells like bacon and fresh coffee," David said.

Hearing the voices, the smell of food overcame the need of warmth. Beth pulled herself away from the fire and rushed into the kitchen. "You know what David did?"

Ma Longacher looked at Beth, then over at David, and shook her head.

David gave his kid sister a pat on her rump. "Tattle tail." He had no idea which of his tomfoolery Beth might be planning to report him for.

"I'll help you, Mother," Hannah said, grabbing some glassware from the cupboard.

"I'll spread the table cloth," Nel said.

"I'll keep an eye on those pies for you, Mother," Beth said as she lay the lace napkins on the table and looked over at David. "Don't you come near, until Ma tells you you can."

"Okay, all you children gather around before these blueberry pancakes get cold," Ma said.

Nel grabbed a big platter, with pretty blue edges only a little chipped, and piled sausage and thick strips of bacon onto it. She carried it to the table. Beth grabbed the chair next to David's.

"Pass me the sausage, Nel," David said, reaching across the table.

Beth smacked his hand. "Before saying Grace?"

David sighed, and whispered just loud enough to be heard by all, “What kind of a savage would I be without all my good women to tame me.” Then he bowed his head.

“Thank you, Lord ...” he began.

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