

Loyalties Divided in Sevier County prior to Civil War

By Carroll McMahan

An oft-repeated legend about the vote on the question of secession in Sevier County suggests only one solitary man voted to secede from the Union when the issue was put to a vote. Although not far from the truth, the account has been somewhat exaggerated over the past century and a half. In fact, the issue was put before the voters on two occasions.

According to the U.S. Census, the population of Sevier County in 1860 was 8, 584 whites and 538 slaves which were owned by 96 slaveholders. John Bell, the Constitution Union party candidate carried the state of Tennessee and Sevier County as well in the presidential election held November 6, 1860. Abraham Lincoln was not on the ballot in Tennessee.

Oliver P. Temple, a Knoxville lawyer, made his first anti- secession speech on the issue in Sevierville on November 21, 1860. Temple then returned to Sevier County in January 1861 to address more than 1,000 Unionist who had gathered at Fair Garden.

Triggered by the election of Abraham Lincoln and the secession of neighboring states, the first special-called election by the legislature took place on February 2, 1861. The question on the ballot was whether to authorize a convention for elected delegates to the issue of secession. Tennessee voters refused to authorize a convention. In Sevier County voters overwhelmingly rejected the proposal by a vote of 1,265 to 69.

The vote did not signal an absolute rejection of secession or quell the debate over the issue. In March a crowd of Unionist gathered at Trundle's Crossroads near Seymour and spent an entire day listening to speeches by U.S. Representative Thomas A.R. Nelson and a couple of Knoxville attorneys

The following week, former Mississippi Governor Henry S. Foote addressed a crowd in Sevierville to rally support for secession. Governor Foote was given such

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a hostile reception that he barely avoided being mobbed. Similar scenarios were taking place throughout the state.

Governor Islam G. Harris called the Tennessee legislature back into special session shortly after news of the surrender of Fort Sumter on April 12 reached the state. The legislators approved measures separating the state from the union and authorizing representation in the Confederacy. Both Senator David Stakely and Representative F. A. Armstrong, who represented Sevier County, voted against the measure.

However, the legislature submitted the act to the voters for approval and scheduled a referendum for June 8. The second debate over secession was even more intense than its first. Passions were high on both sides.

When the referendum votes were tallied, voters in Middle and West Tennessee gave a decisive majority for secession. But in East Tennessee about two-thirds of voters rejected the measure. In Sevier County results were similar to those in February with 1, 525 votes cast against separation and only 60 in favor.

Despite the state's strong support for secession, East Tennessee loyalists were not prepared to accept the results of the referendum. Two days after the vote, representatives from 30 East Tennessee counties and one Middle Tennessee county assembled in Greeneville to consider their next step.

Sevier County sent 18 delegates. On the second day of the convention, the Business Committee which included Samuel Pickens of Sevier County released a set of resolutions.

Declaring that the June referendum had been corrupted by voter intimidation and falsification of poll results, the declaration stated that the referendum results were nonbinding. East Tennessee, along with the loyal counties of Middle Tennessee, would remain in the union as the true state of Tennessee.

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Meanwhile, Parson Brownlow, a staunch Union supporter and editor of the Knoxville *Whig*, used his newspaper to defend Unionists accused of treasonous acts by the Confederate authorities. By the fall of 1861, the *Whig* was the only pro-Union newspaper in the South.

On October 24, 1861, Brownlow suspended publication of his newspaper after announcing Confederate authorities were preparing to arrest him. On the fourth of November Brownlow fled to Sevier County where he delivered a rousing speech at the Sevier County Courthouse en-route to a hide-out in Wears Valley.

Brownlow remained in Wear's Valley for nearly a month, where Unionists kept him hidden, fed him, and watched for Confederate troops. Finally, in mid-December Brownlow returned to Knoxville and requested permission to leave the Confederacy. Confederate authorities instead arrested and imprisoned him.

While the Confederacy mobilized for war, Unionists in Sevier County were preparing to fight, either on the side of the federal forces gathering in the North or on their own at home.

Almost immediately after the Greeneville Convention, Sevier County loyalists began leaving home to join the small Union army that was forming at Camp Nelson, Kentucky. Although Confederate troops were stationed at Knoxville and along the railroad, they made few attempts to stop the exodus.

Many other Unionists who were not yet ready to leave home gathered into Home Guard units. Sevier County men formed a mounted company the same day the referendum was held, and formally organized their Home Guard in August.

Confederate supporters also took up arms. One of the earliest bands was organized by Captain A.L. Mims to suppress loyalist in Cocke County. That same summer William Allen of Cosby was on his way home from Sevierville when he had the misfortune to meet the Mims' scouts near Jones Cove.

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Fearing for his life, Allen took out a jug of whiskey, passed it around, and made friendly conversation. After a time they let Allen go, and he rode away. Before he was out of sight one or more of Mims' men shot and killed him.

Similar situations were reported all over Sevier County. But the war had just begun and the worst was yet to come. The next four years was reputedly the darkest days in the history of Sevier County.