



Berry Benson's Civil War Book: Memoirs of a Confederate Scout and Sharpshooter

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Berry Benson's Civil War Book: Memoirs of a Confederate Scout and Sharpshooter Berry Benson Confederate scout and sharpshooter Berry Greenwood Benson witnessed the first shot fired on Fort Sumter, retreated with Lee's Army to its surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, and missed little of the action in between. This memoir of his service is a remarkable narrative, filled with the minutiae of the soldier's life and paced by a continual succession of battlefield anecdotes.

Three main stories emerge from Benson's account: his reconnaissance exploits, his experiences in battle, and his escape from prison. Though not yet eighteen years old when he left his home in Augusta, Georgia, to join the army, Benson was soon singled out for the abilities that would serve him well as a scout. Not only was he a crack shot, a natural leader, and a fierce Southern partisan, but he had a kind of restless energy and curiosity, loved to take risks, and was an instant and infallible judge of human nature. His recollections of scouting take readers within arm's reach of Union trenches and encampments. Benson recalls that while eavesdropping he never failed to be shocked by the Yankees' foul language; he had never heard that kind of talk in a Confederate camp!

Benson's descriptions of the many battles in which he fought—including Cold Harbor, The Seven Days, Manassas, Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania, and Petersburg—convey the desperation of a full frontal charge and the blind panic of a disorganized retreat. Yet in these accounts, Benson's own demeanor under fire is manifest in the coolly measured tone he employs.

A natural writer, Benson captures the dark absurdities of war in such descriptions as those of hardened veterans delighting in the new shoes and other equipment they found on corpse-littered battlefields. His clothing often torn by bullets, Benson was also badly bruised a number of times by spent rounds. At one point, in May 1863, he was wounded seriously enough in the leg to be hospitalized, but he returned to the field before full recuperation.

Benson was captured behind enemy lines in May 1864 while on a scouting mission for General Lee. Confined to Point Lookout Prison in Maryland, he escaped after only two days and swam the Potomac to get back into Virginia. Recaptured near Washington, D.C., he was briefly held in Old Capitol Prison, then sent to Elmira Prison in New York. There he joined a group of ten men who made the only successful tunnel escape in Elmira's history. After nearly six months in captivity or on the run, he rejoined his unit in Virginia. Even at Appomattox, Benson refused to surrender but stole off with his brother to North Carolina, where they planned to join General Johnston. Finding the roads choked with Union forces and surrendered Confederates, the brothers ultimately bore their unsundered rifles home to Augusta.

Berry Benson first wrote his memoirs for his family and friends. Completed in 1878, they drew on his—and partially on his brother's—wartime diaries, as well as on letters that both brothers had written to family members during the war. The memoirs were first published in book form in 1962 but have long been unavailable. This edition, with a new foreword by the noted Civil War historian Herman Hattaway, will introduce this compelling story to a new generation of readers.

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