

# THUNDER FROM A CLEAR SKY

## STOVEPIPE JOHNSON'S CONFEDERATE RAID ON NEWBURGH, INDIANA

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*The Partisan Rangers of the Confederate State Army:  
Memoirs of General Adam R. Johnson*

edited by William J. Davis

492 pages, published 1904 (currently published by State House Press, 1995)

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### THE STORY

On February 8, 1834, Adam Rankin Johnson was born to Dr. Thomas Jefferson Johnson and the former Miss Juliet Rankin Spencer. Adam Johnson's father was a prominent physician in the region and his mother's family was among the first to settle in Henderson. The young Adam R. Johnson would leave an imprint on Henderson County that would last to our current day.

In the 1840s, Henderson, Kentucky, was one of the primary western purveyors of brown gold. The fertile soil, the importation of slaves, and the tall stacks of the paddleboat steamship made the tobacco leaf a reliable way to wealth. By the time Adam Johnson attended his first day of school, the wheels were already turning on the Henderson money-making machinery.

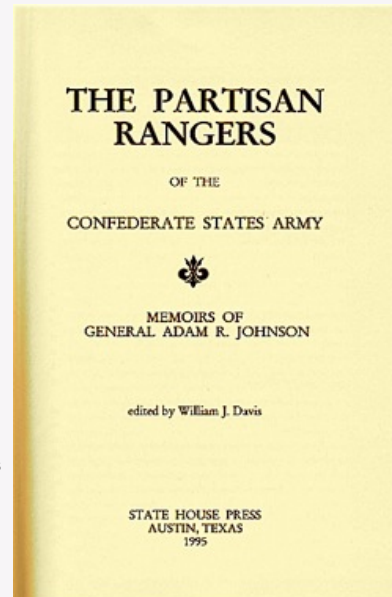
By his own account, and by the written record of his childhood friends, Ad Johnson was a bit of a troublemaker. Not trouble in a serious way, but more as a prankster who was bold enough to do more than talk about reversing the direction of every horse saddle in town. Johnson dreamt up and skillfully executed many a trick on both childhood

cohorts and prominent citizens. As a result, he was well known in Henderson; to some as a borderline delinquent, to others as a high-spirited town jester not to be trifled with. It would be a recurrent theme.

When Johnson was twelve, his formal schooling came to a close and he obtained a job as an apothecary's assistant. Johnson became so adept at the business that he was left to tend it independently for the next four years. At sixteen, Johnson changed jobs and became a proficient lead man in the Henderson tobacco fields, supervising up to eighty hands and setting new productivity records for his employer.

At the age of twenty, Adam Johnson left Kentucky for the Texas frontier and found a job as a surveyor. Surveying was a dangerous job in the Texas hill country in the mid-1850s, as the Comanche still densely inhabited the territory. While marking off plats he was often posted in small, isolated encampments beyond the far edge of settled society. The Comanche understood well that Johnson was a trailblazer for white settlement and strongly resisted the intrusion.

While running supplies to and from his outposts, Johnson often found himself surrounded in hostile territory. Johnson, continuously outnumbered, always seemed to concoct a timely trick or twist to escape disaster. Out of necessity, he developed a tactical vision that relied heavily on weaving a curtain of deception and misdirection. During the 1850s, Johnson's life and the life of his community fellows were often hanging in the balance,



and he tasted blood many times defending his interests. By the Fall of 1860 Johnson had come through six harrowing years in a combat laboratory and emerged with the experiences necessary to drive his future success.

After Lincoln's election, Johnson decided to suspend his affairs in Texas. He married sixteen year-old Josephine Eastland on January 1, 1861, and slowly made his way back to western Kentucky. While in Kentucky at the end of 1861, he ran into Lt. Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest. Johnson marched into Forrest's camp and announced that he wanted to be a scout. Forrest gladly accepted him into Confederate Army service.

Johnson participated in the battle of Sacramento, Kentucky (such as it was), and was then employed as a reconnaissance scout during the Fort Donelson campaign. When Forrest was informed that Confederate forces at Donelson were to surrender, he immediately sent Johnson into the Winter night to find a suitable escape route through Union lines. Johnson found a secure transit and led Forrest's Cavalry to safety.

Johnson was not involved in Shiloh, but did follow the Confederate Army to Corinth, Mississippi, where he had a pivotal meeting with General John C. Breckinridge the day before the Rebel army quit the town. At that meeting the two Kentuckians lamented about the status of the Bluegrass State and were convinced that, if given the opportunity, Kentucky's Southern proclivities would eventually pull the state toward the Confederacy; all that was needed was the grass-roots leadership to bring recruits forth from hiding. Johnson was given orders by Breckinridge to recruit a Confederate cavalry regiment from Union-held western Kentucky. This was the beginning of Johnson's independent command in the Civil War.

Johnson rode into western Kentucky in June of 1862 without any well-founded mechanism to bring rebel recruits in from across Union-held territory. After quietly knocking on doors for two weeks without results, Johnson decided to invent a new approach to the problem. He would engage in a series of high-profile attacks on Union garrisons throughout western Kentucky in order to get the credibility and publicity to attract recruits. In the span of six weeks, Johnson launched successful surprise attacks on Union positions in Henderson and Madisonville, Kentucky; Newburgh, Indiana; and Clarksville, Tennessee. His strategy was a success. As newspapers reported each attack with inflated claims topped by each succeeding event, volunteers began to tumble into Johnson's command. In August 1862 Johnson received his commission as colonel of the 10th Kentucky Cavalry, men that would later be known as the Partisan Rangers.

As his command grew he attached himself to the larger and more notorious Kentucky cavalry brigade of Colonel John Hunt Morgan. Johnson was part of Morgan's Raiders during his Kentucky Christmas raid of December 1862 and was also a reluctant part of Morgan's Great Raid through Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio in the summer of 1863.

Morgan's Great Raid of 1863 ended in disaster when almost all of his men were captured on Union soil. However, Johnson and 300 bedraggled Rebel soldiers escaped Union clutches by swimming south on the Ohio River back to Virginia. Johnson was the highest ranking officer to escape the consequences of Morgan's Great Raid.

Johnson's exploits made him a noted folk hero in western Kentucky and Rebel sympathizers throughout the region flocked to him when he returned to the area in 1864. On August 21, 1864, as Johnson was returning to his own lines after capturing a group of Union soldiers, he was blinded by a shot fired in error by his own men. Eventually, Johnson's mother learned of the news and brought him back to Henderson where he recovered from his wounds.

Upon his recovery Johnson was arrested as a prisoner of war and incarcerated at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor. He was exchanged near the end of the war and was desperately trying to re-assemble a command as the war ended.

Physically depleted and mentally exhausted, Johnson refused all offers to remain in Kentucky and instead returned to Texas. Possessing abundant property as payment from his previous employment as a surveyor, Johnson opened a successful land office and dealt in Texas expansion for thirteen years. Johnson later went on to success in numerous business endeavors including cotton and mining. He founded the town of Marble Falls, Texas, in 1887, where his relatives live today.

Johnson dictated his memoirs at the turn of the century and died at the age of eighty-eight

in 1922. He was honored as a hero in two states.

## THE BOOK

*Partisan Rangers* is Adam Rankin Johnson's "stream-of-consciousness" autobiography published in 1904. You will not read another book like it. That said, it is a bit of an odd duck, structurally. For the first 226 pages Adam Johnson gives a broad ranging sketch of his life from the age of eight until his late 60s. The last 250 pages are an assortment of testimonials to Adam Johnson by his friends; an enumeration of almost all the men who served under Johnson as part of the Partisan Rangers; a seemingly unrelated article on Morgan's escape from the Ohio State Penitentiary; assorted profiles of many of the men who fought in the Partisan Rangers; a recitation on Morgan's Cavalry by Johnson's friend, General Basil Duke, and on and on. Although some pieces of Morgan's exploits don't seem to fit, the other sketches provide the most complete picture we are likely to get of Johnson's men.

*Partisan Rangers* is the type of book that you can't read just once. You probably can't read it just twice. The high-speed prattle of death-defying events is simply exhausting. Adam R. Johnson seems to be a director, a supporting actor, or a featured star in a running series of historic events in the last half of the 19th century. Johnson's adventures as an 1850s surveyor and Indiana-fighter, his early Civil War association with the famous Nathan Bedford Forrest, the 1862 capture of a half-dozen towns in Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee; his participation in, and escape from, Morgan's 1863 Great Raid into Indiana and Ohio, his 1864 reassembly of Morgan's Cavalry, his accidental blinding during maneuvers in west Kentucky, his 1865 capture, imprisonment, release and re-introduction to field command all paint a withering blizzard of audacious exploits. All without addressing his prosperous post-war career as a political activist, friend to the well-connected, real estate dealer, rancher, cotton magnate, mine owner, town founder, father, author, etc. Adam Johnson lived a life full enough for all the men in his famous Partisan Rangers.

Johnson had been sharing his wartime recollections with friends, business associates and family for years in Texas, no doubt with additional embellishments upon every re-telling. When Johnson finally decided to dictate his memoirs the events of the Civil War were nearly forty years in the past. Part II of *Partisan Rangers*, as well as other research, indicates that he contacted some of the men who shared in his life experiences and no doubt checked and re-assembled some recollections. Despite some research on Johnson's part, many of the events in *Partisan Rangers* are told from a, well..., partisan viewpoint. As mentioned earlier, the final work takes the form of a stream-of-consciousness recollection that likely mimics how Johnson used to hold court during his story-telling bouts in post-war Texas.

I admit that I have done a bit more than just read *Partisan Rangers*; I have studied and research it page by page and, in some spots, line by line. I have searched for and found corroborating evidence for many of the events in the book. For many events I have searched for corroboration and found either nothing or contradiction. What is essential to understand about this book is that it is *Adam Johnson's* later-life recollection of things he did and things he was involved in from *his* point of view. Johnson is not a historian and he makes no attempt at impartial analysis. If the book is read with this understanding, it will be enlightening and entertaining. If the book is read solely as a historical document, you will have to spend a great deal of time assembling the fuzzy details and chronology of events. I have pondered *Partisan Rangers* both ways and it is best read as one man's account of an incredible life story. I have read the book six times and each time I find enough new to justify reading it one more time. I'll be reading it again.

Like most of the old Civil War memoirs, the book is now off copyright and has been printed by several companies over the years. Currently it is printed by State House Press in Austin, Texas (1995). I am grateful for the added index in the most recent printing.

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