

John W. “Jack” Hinson

Jack Hinson was a slave owner in an area of Tennessee known as “Land Between the Rivers” at the time of the Civil War. It was bound by the Tennessee River on the west, the Cumberland River on the east and the Lower Ohio River across the north. It was approximately 60 miles long, south to north and 10 to 15 miles east to west. After the Tennessee Valley Authority took it over it has become the “Land Between the Lakes,” bordered on the west by Lake Kentucky and Lake Barkley on the east. Even though he was a slave owner, Jack was totally neutral in the war. And as all upper class slave owners he never referred to them as slaves, but as servants.

Jack was born in North Carolina in 1807 and was 54-years-old when the war began. The family moved to Tennessee in 1830 and Jack married a Tennessee native by the name of Elisabeth James. Jack and Elisabeth built a large, prosperous plantation and a large family. The Plantation was known as Bubbling Springs. By the start of the war, his two oldest sons, Robert and George had left home to start their own families. There were still eight at home; the boys were William, eighteen; John, fifteen; Albert, fourteen; Joseph, twelve; Charles, ten; and Thomas, eight. The two young girls were Mary and Margaret, three and two.

Jack was strongly opposed to abolitionists like John Brown. But he also did not want to see the nation divided. He was surrounded with secessionists, but held tightly to his neutrality. On May 18, 1861, Jack’s oldest son joined the Confederate States Army (CSA) under General Samuel Smith Donelson for whom the nearby Fort Donelson was named.

The war itself had no impact on the plantation until January 31, 1862. General Grant advanced on Ft. Henry and Ft. Donelson and the Union Army was now on Bubbling Springs land. Jack had come to know General Pillow of the CSA and General Grant of the Union and maintained a neutral relationship to both.

In the summer of 1862 Jack felt it best to give his slaves their freedom. The Union soldiers were confiscating his neighbor’s slaves and no one knew what was happening to them after that. He figured that by making them free they would be safer. If they wished they could leave or he would pay a reasonable salary if they stayed. He gave their freedom just months before Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation which declared all slaves in the seceded states as free. Not all slaves, just those in the seceded states.

The neutrality that Jack had tried so hard to maintain was about to abruptly come to an end. In the autumn of 1862 Jack’s sons, George and John, were out in their woods doing some hunting as they had been doing most of their life. Instead of deer a patrol from the Fifth Iowa Cavalry came by. This did not frighten the boys as they had seen many patrols and not been molested. The lieutenant leading the patrol spotted the boys with their rifles and decided they were spies. He had some of his troops tie the boys to a tree and they used the boys for target practice. Killing the boys was not enough. The lieutenant raised his sharp sabre and decapitated the boys. Still not satisfied, he had the bodies taken to the county seat, Dover, and placed on public display. There is an unconfirmed legend that he had the bodies dragged around the courthouse several times. Their next act has been confirmed.

A local doctor in Dover rushed to Bubbling Springs to relate the tragedy to the family and to warn them they were in danger. The Union held all the family of a spy equally

STORIES OF THE CIVIL WAR

guilty. As the doctor and John stood on the front porch they looked on in horror and disbelief as the soldiers impaled a head on each of the gateposts at the entry.

The lieutenant then rode up to Jack and accused him and the family of being spies. The good doctor knew the lieutenant and convinced him the Hinsons were not spies. The soldiers then tore the house apart searching for weapons. The lieutenant had set into action a chain of events that would destroy the Hinson family, hundreds of Union families and the lieutenant himself. Jack was about to turn into a one-man war machine.

Even as the family mourned their loss Jack was forming a plan and it required a special, custom-made, .50 caliber rifle with a rifled barrel rather than the standard smooth bore. America's best iron was found right there in Stewart County and Jack decided to have the rifle built from materials available in the county. Jack spent the time that it took to build the rifle to his specifications in planning, obtaining supplies and studying the movement of Union patrols without being detected. He learned their routes, their mannerisms, their armament and he learned to see without being seen. He also selected places in the woods that would give him a perfect place to perform his sniper plans. He spent time studying the river bank for places he could use to hide and fire on Union river boats. During all of his scouting and planning one thing burned in his mind—that lieutenant.

In an effort to reduce the suspicions of the Union soldiers, on February 21, 1863 he rode into the fort and took the pledge of allegiance. In March of 1863 Jack's son Robert was arrested as a spy which normally meant execution or shipment north to a POW camp. But the Union hesitated to take action and Robert escaped into the wilderness of Stewart County. Knowing that the Union held that all the family of a spy were equally guilty Jack decided it was time to act.

Jack received a message that his rifle was ready and what a rifle it was for that period. The stock from butt to muzzle was a single piece of carefully chosen, air cured maple. The octagonal barrel was very heavy, nearly 41 inches long and 1.5 inches around, bored to .50 caliber. The total weight was eighteen pounds which meant it would have to rest on a support for accuracy. It also had no fancy, shiny metal work. It was state of the art, but very plain.

The day had arrived and Jack arose early on a spring morning. In the darkness he walked across fields, through woods, crossed creeks and climbed a draw to reach his preselected firing point. An old oak tree that had fallen years before provided a perfect rest for the heavy rifle and an unobstructed view of the place where they had killed his sons. Soldiers, like all men, are a creature of habit and from long observation he knew they would be coming by his ambush very soon.

Soon he could hear the noise of the approaching troops and he trained his rifle on the open spot on the trail below, only fifty yards away. He only had about three seconds to spot and identify his target. First the horse came into view, then the soldier's arm and Jack saw the epaulet of an officer. Then the face was in view and it was the object of all of his hatred and his efforts to this point. He touched the trigger and the lieutenant's throat disappeared before the shot was heard.

The soldiers panicked, but the sergeant soon took command and led them up the hill toward where the sound had come from. Jack had disappeared without a trace. And he had killed his first man, ever. Jack now debated with himself whether the desired vengeance had been achieved. As the summer went along and Jack was tending to

business, he would often think of another man. He could still see clearly the face of the sergeant who had pulled the heads of his son out of a bloody gunny sack and impaled them on the gateposts.

One day as he wandered about, tending to business, visiting with neighbors and spying on Union patrols, as he always did, he spotted the sergeant among the troops heading out. He knew the patrol would come back that way and what time they would be there. So he had most of the day to plan and prepare an unexpected surprise on their return. Again he hid behind an old moss covered log where he could see an opening to the road without being seen. A bank between himself and the road would slow down any attempt to chase him and he had a perfect escape route available.

Jack adjusted his sight picture and drew a bead on the fork in a small tree the other side of the road. He already knew that would put his bullet in the middle of the chest of a mounted rider. With his aim already set all he had to do was a slight touch of the trigger. Remembering where the sergeant was positioned in the group, when the leader came into his sight he knew the next guy was his target. The bullet and the sound arrived almost simultaneously. The impact of the bullet knocked the sergeant off his horse and he was silenced forever. In the surprise and confusion among the troops, Jack again totally disappeared before anyone could spot him. He would have been glad to quit at that point, but he knew the army would never leave him alone.

His sons, Robert and George, had joined guerilla gangs that wreaked havoc on the army and they became wanted men. Massive patrols would be mounted to search for them. But they were as elusive as Jack until one day a small contingent of guerillas accidentally bumped into a small group of Union soldiers. Both sides fired a few shots and then withdrew. Two men on each side were killed and one of them was Robert Hinson. George had been killed in 1862. William who had been captured at Antietam was paroled. He returned to his unit, but was furloughed because of chronic illness. He returned to Bubbling Springs in a state of near death and Elisabeth nursed and fed him back to health. In January of 1864 it was time for William to return to his unit. His was a tearful goodbye and as the family watched him ride away no one realized they would never see each other again. Jack had now lost five of his sons to the Yankees.

Colonel A. A. Smith, Commanding Office of Ft. Donelson had no doubt that Jack was responsible for the killings. The killing of his two young sons was still fresh in people's mind. Two of the soldiers involved had been killed near his home. His constant movement had not gone completely unnoticed and two of his sons were guerilla leaders. Col. Smith could no longer endure the existence of the Hinsons. They were the enemy and had to be treated as such. He decided they would be dealt with at first light the next day.

Loose lips sink ships was as true in those days as it is today and, sure enough, Smith's plans were leaked out and the news spread like wildfire. When the news hit Dover his friends rushed to Bubbling Springs to warn him and help the family get away. Selected family belongings, along with Elisabeth and the children, were loaded into a large snow sled pulled by two mules. The parents were both extremely concerned because the two young girls were very sick with the often deadly measles. But to remain would mean sure death to some, if not all, of the family. They would also be accompanied by two of the most trusted male servants. They would go west to a safe haven with family members.

STORIES OF THE CIVIL WAR

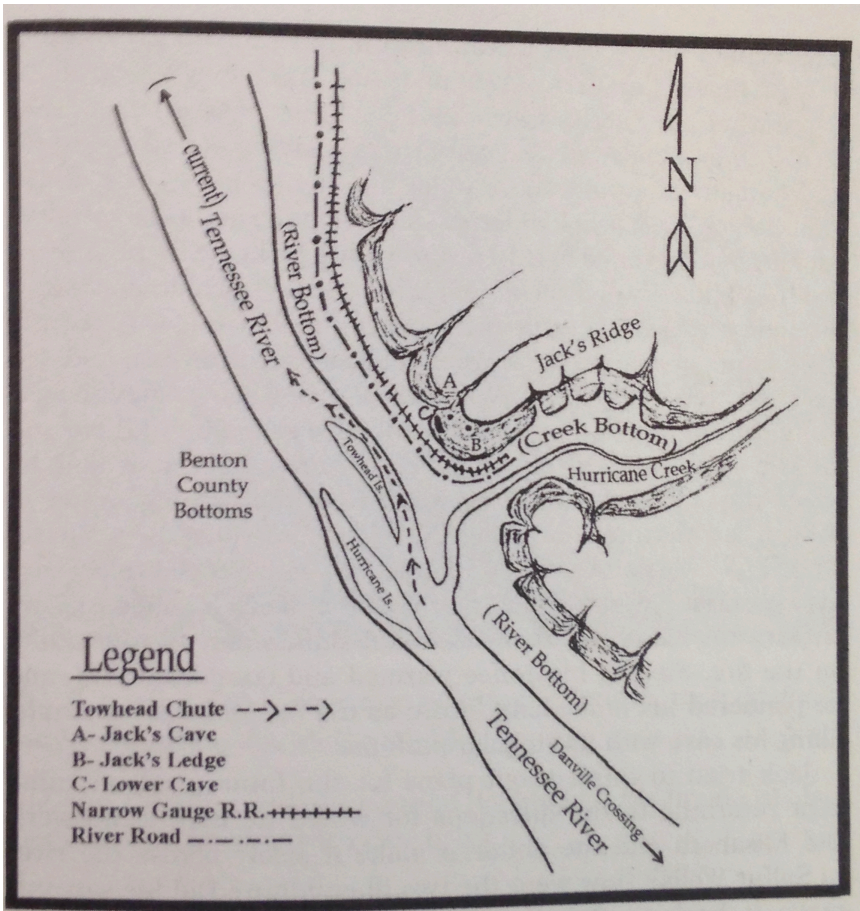
Were the family to be caught by the Union Army in Jack's company it would surely mean capture and likely death. In a driving snow storm around dark, Jack led the sled west toward Wynn's Ferry to cross the Tennessee River. When they were a safe distance from home and no longer in danger from Col. Smith, Jack returned to the home place for his rifle and some supplies. He was now all alone and a hunted man with a handsome reward on his head. With the help of a servant named Sarah, who remained at the home to look after it, he was soon equipped and riding away, not knowing that in about 12 hours his beloved home would be utterly destroyed.

The patrol, under command of a lieutenant, reached Bubbling Springs in the early morning hours. Banging loudly on the door, the lieutenant demanded that the Hinsons open up. Sarah answered the door and provided no help to the lieutenant, but she did tell him the truth. The Hinsons were gone, she didn't know where and she didn't know when they would be back. Not believing her, he ordered three soldiers to accompany him into the house for a thorough search. Largely destroying the furnishings of the house, and searching all of the outbuildings, the lieutenant came to realize the fox had fled the chicken coop. The angry lieutenant ordered the building to be burned down and in just a short time it was nothing but ashes and two chimneys standing alone. The servants were able to persuade the patrol to leave the outbuildings and their quarters undamaged.

It was not possible for Jack to stay with family or friends, so he headed into the wilderness where he made a den for himself in a small cave high upon a bluff overlooking the Tennessee River at the point where all boats had to pass through a narrow strip of rapids (**See photo to right**). Across the river from Jack's cave was the large Hurricane Island. The smaller Towhead Island was on his side of the river and near the bank. The force of the river passing between Towhead and the bank

created the rapids known as Towhead Chute. All large boats had to pass through the chute. Northbound boats would shoot the rapids at a great speed. Southbound craft would need all the power they could generate to progress through the narrow straight.

The cold stone of the cave floor made sleeping difficult and lots of pain and stiffness in the body. Over time he was able to make a fairly comfortable bed with leaves and mulch that had to dry out inside the cave before it could be used. The cave was virtually



STORIES OF THE CIVIL WAR

invisible until you were right up to it. He also picked out several other safe places he could hide if he continued to take shots at the passing boats.

He could have never found a better place for hiding and it provided a perfect firing point on those boats passing through the chute. Jack sat down to smoke his pipe and think. Before the pipe was finished, the first boat came into view. As it got closer he could see it was a US Navy gunboat and it almost came to standstill when it hit the rapids. Jack had all the time in the world to pick a target and he had decided he would only kill officers. As his sight picture swept the length of the boat he spotted the captain and his executive officer. The captain had two vertical rows of brass buttons on his coat and Jack took aim at the third button from the top. Then he lowered it to the fourth button because he knew he would shoot high firing downhill. He touched the trigger and the captain never heard the shot. The bullet tore through his left side and exited under his right arm. The massive wounds were spreading blood on the deck before the crew heard the rifle's report.

Jack saw the smoke from another boat and again prepared himself for a shot. This boat turned out to be some kind of civilian packet, probably a mail boat from Paducah headed south. Civilians had nothing to fear from Jack.

Jack sat in the sun for a while and the warmth of the sun caused him to fall asleep. After a bit he awoke and saw smoke from another boat. When it came into sight he saw that it was a transport, but there was no cargo visible. This boat was filled with soldiers and they were all armed with rifles. Jack began to prepare his rifle for another shot. The soldiers were all lounging about on the boat as soldiers are wont to do. Jack scanned until he found the army officers on deck. He concentrated on them until he determined which one appeared to be the commanding officer. He was smoking a pipe and other officers were gathered around listening to him. Jack again picked the third button from the top and moved the sight just a little to the left and down just a little to compensate for a slight wind and a downhill shot and he touched the trigger. The bullet entered the upper chest and exited through a large hole in the lower back and lodged in the leg of a lieutenant behind him. The captain was thrown into the lieutenant and both ended up in a heap on the now blood stained deck with the lieutenant underneath the dead captain. It had been quite a day for Jack.

At this time there was no general alarm over the shooting deaths occurring at Towhead Chute. However, the chute would become a place for total dread for army and navy personnel, especially on those boats headed south. There would come a time when nine regiments were out looking for an old man almost 60 years of age.

Smoke to the north gave evidence of a southbound boat approaching the Towhead Chute. Jack checked his rifle, tapped the load against the powder, and laid the ramrod aside. With a cap on the nipple and the hammer down, Jack was ready. He watched the boat as it was approaching. Another transport appearing to be carrying supplies south to Johnsonville.

Jack spotted three officers and the one giving orders to the helmsman appeared to be the captain. Jack adjusted his sight picture to bring a bead on the center of the man's chest. He cocked the hammer, seated the cap firmly on the nipple and cocked the set trigger then lowered his bead slightly. Just as Jack took his second-deep breath and let half of it out, the captain spotted something downstream and turned to his right. When

STORIES OF THE CIVIL WAR

Jack touched the trigger, the captain had his back to him. The bullet struck the captain between the shoulder blades, driving him to his knees and his face struck the wheelhouse bulkhead. He felt neither of the two impacts.

Jack could no longer stand the loneliness and homesickness and knew he needed to see his family before they learned of the loss of Bubbling Springs by some other means. He decided to head west to his family. He had to cross the Tennessee River which meant by ferry. Soldiers normally guarded two of the three ferries, but Wynn's ferry was often unguarded. He reached a point where he could watch the ferry go back and forth across the river. Nothing he saw made him think that he had anything to fear. He waited until near the end of day before boarding the last crossing of the day.

It had only been six extremely long days that seemed to be six months since Jack had seen the family. The reunion was extremely emotional and wordless until Jack noticed that his two daughters were not with them. Then it turned heartbreaking as he learned of their deaths. Two more children lost to what could be blamed on the war.

As the sun moved low in the west the next day, Jack took his leave of the family he had remaining and headed back to Wynn's ferry. He had decided to return to Bubbling Springs and see the damage for himself. After leaving the ferry he turned into the woods and rode his horse parallel to the road so as to be unseen by any possible patrols.

He arrived at Bubbling Springs more than an hour after full darkness. The sight that met his eyes was heart breaking. He had known what he would see, but the reality added finality. He would examine the burnt remains the next day and turned his horse back toward the servant quarters. The reunion with his black family was very nearly as emotional as it had been with his real family. He declined an invitation to spend the night because of fear for their safety. They agreed to meet for breakfast in the morning and he spent the night as comfortable as possible in the tobacco barn.

As he left the plantation he stopped at his blacksmith shop and picked up a small hammer and a one-eighth inch steel punch. He had decided to keep score of his kills. He carefully punched five circles into the upper surface of the octagonal barrel. Today, there are 36 punch marks on the rifle, but some think there were at least one hundred kills. He dropped the punch and the hammer into his saddlebag and began his journey back to his den and killing spot. On the way he passed through what is known as the Hundred Acre Field, the largest cleared field in the area and it still exists today.

Shortly after leaving the safety of the forest and entering the big field he spotted two soldiers entering the field on the far side. They had not seen him and Jack reacted instinctively. He laid his rifle in the tall grass where it immediately disappeared. He also left some other incriminating equipment with the weapon and rode to meet the soldiers. He decided that they were freelancing on their own and trying to earn the reward. When asked, he admitted that he knew Jack Hinson and that he had seen him an hour earlier over near Standing Rock Creek. When asked for directions to the spot, Jack gave them directions. However, he gave them directions that would take them well away from the nearest route. The soldiers hurried off through the woods to find the spot. Jack retrieved his rifle and rode off in a different direction. He would reach the spot, one that he had preselected during his scouts, ahead of the soldiers with a prepared surprise.

Jack had expected to be there about 10 minutes before the soldiers, but they must have pushed their horses hard. He had been ready for no more than two or three minutes before he heard the sounds of their arrival. For a year Jack had been practicing a fast

load technique and he had it down to the point he could fire, reload and get off another shot in six seconds, but this time it was for real and his life depended on it. He aimed where the first horse should be appearing any second. When the horse's head came into view Jack adjusted the sight upwards just a bit. Just as soon as the first soldier appeared Jack touched the trigger. The round struck the soldier between the right breast bone and the shoulder. Jack pulled his rifle back under his armpit; tore the powder open with his teeth; poured the powder down the muzzle and then the bullet; picked up the ramrod and rammed the load home; pushed the rifle back over the stump; cocked the hammer; recapped; and set the trigger. He had performed the task without a hitch. Meanwhile the second soldier lunged forward and looked up the hill to the sound of the shot. Too late, he may have spotted Jack's head and the muzzle just before Jack touched the trigger. The round slammed into the middle of the soldier's chest.

He returned to the Hundred Acre Field to retrieve the rest of his belongings. He knew the dead soldiers' horses would soon be returning to Ft. Donelson with empty saddles and there would be a mad rush to find him. He returned once again to his den. On the third day after his return a gunboat entered the chute where it was immediately slowed down. Jack figured the boat would be in the chute for at least forty-five minutes. Jack would have plenty of time to get off more than one shot. Once again he spotted three officers on the quarterdeck, choosing the one most likely to be the skipper he sighted on the chosen button, dropped the bead slightly and touched the trigger with the same results as always. He jerked the rifle back and started the reload process. Next he chose the back of one of the officers staring down at the dead man and the bullet sent him on top of the first. Again he reloaded, but sat back and watched the activity as the lone standing officer took charge.

Many gunboats came down through the chute during that spring and summer and the results were usually the same, loss of life. One incident in particular would stand out and be unique in military history. A heavily loaded, armed transport entered the chute carrying cargo and as many armed soldiers as possible. Jack laid out the supplies to make several shots. The first navy officer went down and as the men stared at the body they heard the crack of the shot. A few soldiers fired blindly into the bushes along the bank and at what appeared to be disappearing smoke on the upper bluff. Another naval officer went down, followed by an Army officer. Another army officer appeared in Jack's sight and he was down immediately followed by yet another. The captain of the boat knew something had to be done as he would still be in the chute for a long time. He ordered the engines to be throttled back and the bow anchors dropped. He then told a petty officer to run up a white flag. No flag was available so they ran up a white table cloth from the officers' mess. Jack stared in total disbelief. All by himself he had captured a boat, its cargo, surviving crew members and an infantry unit. Jack had no idea what to do next. He only knew that he could not fire on men that had surrendered to him. He decided to do absolutely nothing except to stay hidden. Finally, the captain realized there would be no contingent of Confederates coming to take over the boat and make all of them prisoners of war. The captain then gave the orders to weigh anchor and engines all ahead full. Never before in history and never since has one man caused a boat load of military people to surrender.

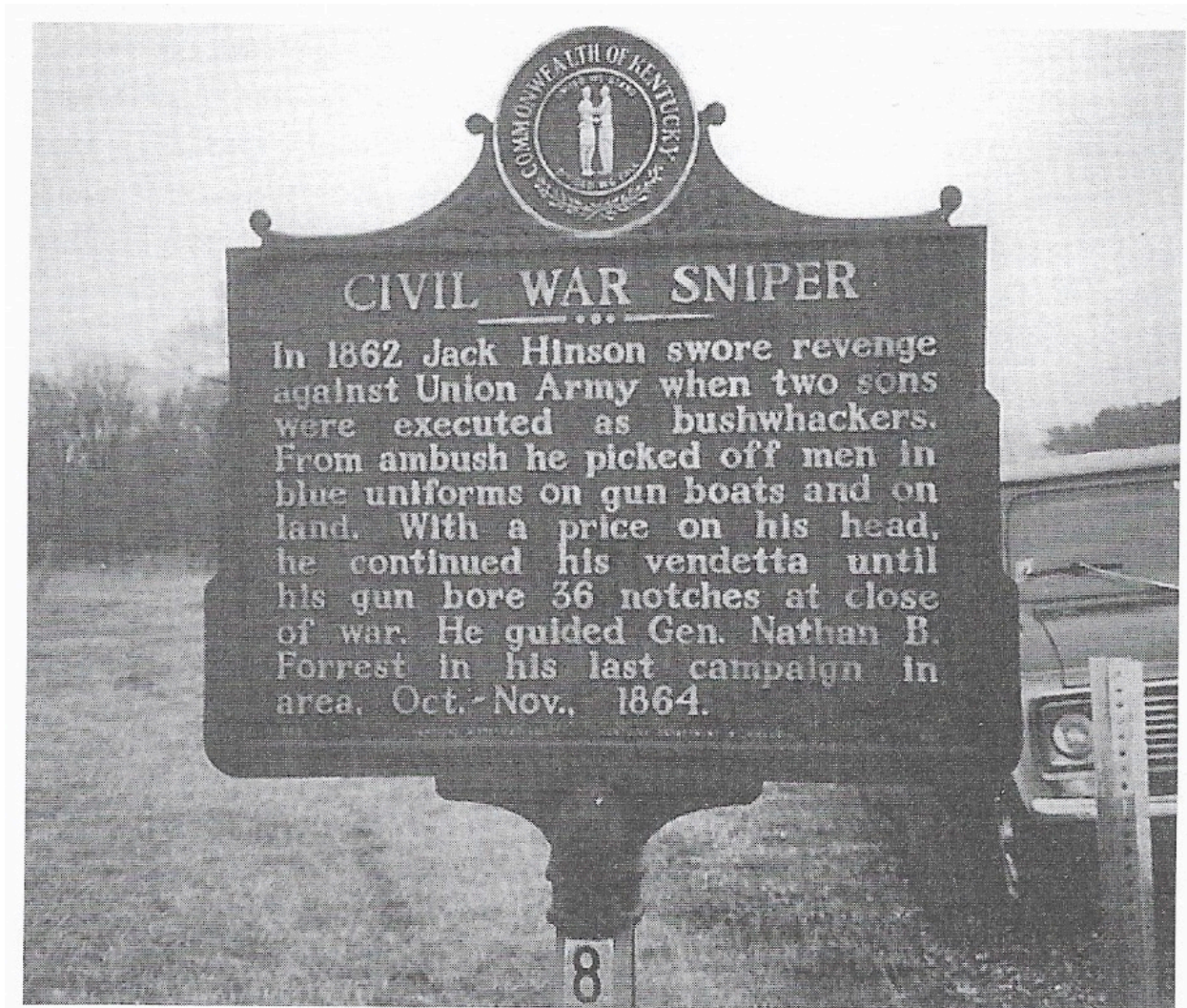
Time and space prevents a coverage of all his exploits along the river. He would soon join up with General Nathan Bedford Forrest and make military history again. That is a story for a future day.

STORIES OF THE CIVIL WAR

My sole source for this story is one of the most fascinating books I have ever read, *Jack Hinson's One-Man War*. It was written by retired Marine Lt Col Tom C. McKenney. In the mid 60s McKenney took a trip through the area where this bit of history took place and saw the historical marker pictured below. He never forgot the sign and the short history of Jack Hinson. He was determined to learn more of the man and his story. His duties took him to other places and it was the early 1990s, before he could begin his search. His research started with the numbers on the marker and went from there for fifteen years.

My little synopsis of his story doesn't begin to tell of the tragedies that Jack and his family went through during that terrible war. People began calling him Captain Jack, but at no time was he a member of the Confederate Army, For Jack it was just personal.

I could not give any book that I have read on the Civil War, actually not any nonfiction book, a higher recommendation than I give this one. If you are a Civil War buff it is a must-have for the library.



In 1867 Jack and Elisabeth built a new home, but they would only have seven more years together. Jack's one man war finally ended in 1874 at the age of 66. An old man for that era. Elisabeth survived for another two and a half years, dying in December 1875.

STORIES OF THE CIVIL WAR

She was only 59, but few women have ever had to deal with the heartbreak and hardships that she suffered after the war touched her home.