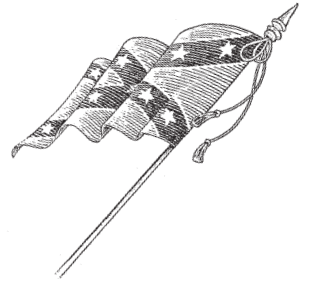


The Austin CIVIL WAR Round Table



September 2009

Program Details

September 17th

Dinner: 6:30 p.m.
Program: 7:15 p.m.

Location

Texas State Cemetery
909 Navasota Street

Rations

Roast Beef w/ Gravy
Roasted Vegetables
Cauliflower w/ Cheese Sauce
Tossed Salad, Rolls
Assorted Cookies
Coffee, Tea, and Water

Meal: \$15

Meeting only: Members – \$5
Nonmembers – 1st meeting
FREE, \$10 thereafter.

Reservations

**YOU MUST RSVP
FOR DINNER!**

Contact our electronic
mailbox by telephone:
916-3412 by Noon,
Tuesday, Sept. 15th

(ACWRT must pay for all meals, so if you make reservations but do not show up, you will have to pay for the meal unless you cancel 48 hours in advance.)

ATTENTION: MEETING PLACE CHANGE FOR
THIS MONTH! (see p. 6 for map)

Program/Speaker

Moss Bluff Rebel:

A Texas Pioneer in the Civil War

Presented by
Phillip Caudill

Whenever a soldier of the Civil War is the focus of a Civil War book, he often seems to be a product of his age, and it's hard to imagine what the individual might have been like in another place or time. This is not the case with **William Berry Duncan** of Liberty County, Texas, the subject of the eighteenth book in the Sam Rayburn Series on rural life in east Texas. A businessman first and foremost, Duncan was always looking for the next big deal and reveled in making it. He was a good family man but had an eye for the ladies. He loved to hunt and to eat wild turkeys, but he was a bit too fond of whiskey and draw poker. This book was released March 2, 2009, coinciding with Duncan's birthday and that of Texas. Although he did not reach Texas until he was 8 years old, Duncan in many ways was the quintessential Texan.

(continues on p. 2)

Duncan, a cattle owner who drove his own cattle to market in southern Louisiana, began his diary in the days of the Texas Republic, using it as a business record. The route Duncan took to Louisiana was the primary route of Texas cattlemen in the Republic days: along the Atascosito Trail that went from San Antonio to Brashear City, Louisiana, via all major settlements in between. As the cattle reached each settlement, deals were made to sell the herds piecemeal. In the good years for cattlemen, the cattle would all be sold before reaching Brash-ear City; if they were not, a quick steamboat trip to New Orleans took the remainder of the herd to where the final deal of the year could be made. Duncan's diary entries were seldom more than a few sentences for each day in which he recorded his business deals, purchases, and gambling winnings, but these records would paint an interesting picture of life in southeast Texas and southwest Louisiana, especially during the Civil War as the Confederate economy collapsed.

The author, Philip Caudill, has expanded on this sketchy primary material with added research and presented a well-written and fascinating picture of life in southeast Texas from the perspective of a cavalry company commander. It is easy to imagine Duncan transported to our time, using his Blackberry to make a business deal and to later "tweet" about the deal and how much he won at the card tables the night before. On weekdays at 6 p.m. he could easily be conflicted over whether to tune into CNBC and Jim Cramer's Mad Money or ESPN2's 2009 World Series of Poker. Caudill makes you feel like you know Duncan as well as a colleague.

Unfortunately, and probably because Duncan did not record personal details, we never feel like we know the private man. He was married twice — his first wife died of pneumonia

nine years into their marriage, and he re-married 18 months later. There is no indication of how the death of his first wife and some of his children affected him personally or how the courtship of his second wife developed. His diary, like him, was first and foremost about business and facts.

When the secession crisis arose, Duncan was a wealthy cattleman and landowner with a few slaves. He seems to have been distracted from the crisis by the illness and death of his second son. Although he was probably sympathetic to secession, his primary concerns when his period of mourning ended seemed to be how the crisis might affect his business enterprises. After the fighting began, Duncan, like many wealthy married men of the era, did not immediately answer the call to arms. A year later, he was handpicked by his neighbor and friend, Lt. Col. Ashley Spaight, to replace him as the commander of Company F, 11th Texas (Spaight's) Battalion. This battalion was organized for the defense of southeast Texas as a legion, meaning it had elements of all three combat arms in a self-contained unit. Companies A and F were cavalry companies, Company B was a field artillery battery from the Sabine Pass area, and Companies C, D, and E were the infantry companies. Duncan reluctantly accepted his friend's appointment, but he was concerned about leaving the day-to-day operations of his very profitable cattle business.

Spaight's Battalion seldom served as an integrated unit during the war. It was usually dispersed as independent companies that served in defensive works near key targets in southeast Texas or moved from one threatened place to another in southeast Texas or southwest Louisiana. As a result of this use of the unit, the remoteness of the Trans-Mississippi, special assignments, and illness, Duncan never really saw any serious combat during the war.

He only came under desultory naval gunfire once during a minor incursion by Federal gunboats at Sabine Pass in January 1863. It was also the only time Duncan saw a newly killed soldier, a Union man, whom Duncan paid one of his men to bury in the Sabine Pass cemetery (the soldier still lies in that cemetery today beneath an unknown marker).

Duncan's Civil War experience does provide some interesting insights into the Civil War experience in southeast Texas. The proximity of home and the ability to return there regularly and for extended periods of time probably caused greater morale problems for the Texas troops who actually saw the suffering on the homefront than for the Texas soldiers far from home in Virginia or Tennessee. Duncan was one of those soldiers who frequently went home, and as a result he was a regular passenger on the Houston and Orange Railroad Line that ran through Liberty. The challenges, travails, and difficulties of travel, especially during the regular rains of southeast Texas, are detailed in the book. On more than one occasion, Duncan would have arrived home sooner by horse rather than waiting for a train to arrive or even be able to operate. His special assignment in the summer of 1863 to attempt to convince deserters at home to return to the ranks, in exchange for amnesty, points out the problem of desertion among Texas troops during the war. It is also amusing to read of Duncan and his men complaining about the sulfurous smell of their camp on the future site of the Spindletop oil strike.

Some of Duncan's business arrangements during the war would be of questionable ethics today. He continued to operate his cattle business while on duty, even selling cattle to the Confederacy, an obvious conflict of interest in our time. He also lent large sums of money to his commanding officer, Spaight, during the

war and played in many high-stakes poker games where a month's pay could be won or lost in a single night of cards.

Caudill does a superb job of fleshing out the story of William Duncan during the Civil War. At times the reader will feel as if he or she is witnessing the events through Duncan's eyes. At other times Caudill does seem to go a bit too far in trying to interpret events or read the thoughts of his protagonist. For example, Caudill seems to be channeling World War II when he speaks of Confederate censors for the mail, and Vietnam when he suggests that Duncan suffered from some sort of post-traumatic stress disorder, not for any action he saw but for the unlikely notion that he felt guilty because he had not seen enough action during the war.

Duncan returned from the war a broken man in health and finances. He was unfit to hit the Atascosito Trail but always rode out to see his colleagues as they drove their cattle through Liberty County on their way to south Louisiana. All his investments took a turn for the worst after the war: A sawmill venture was an utter failure, and even his best investment — setting up some former slaves as sharecroppers on his land — was plagued by the complete destruction of its cotton harvest by boll weevils a month before his death in 1867.

Moss Bluff Rebel is an exceptionally fast and interesting read for anyone interested in the history of Texas, business, the Civil War, or rural Texas life. ★

Review by David White

Moss Bluff Rebel

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