The Last Civil War Veterans: The Lives of the Final Survivors, State By State by Frank L. Gryzb

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Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

As the title suggests in this widely researched book Frank Gryzb has sought to find the last survivors of the American Civil War in all fifty states. He has wisely written that there may not be a final word on the topic as new information continually emerges. It has already: recruit Arnold Murray has had stronger evidence come in than when I assisted the author with collected information in early 2015. He also wisely writes about the many problems historians have in this

topic; namesakes, lies and boostings about enlistment ages and those falsifying their pasts for publicity or government pensions are only three of the most common difficulties. The brevity of newspaper reports and the way aged veterans could not always remember clearly several decades later added to the muddle. Even so, the usual lack of detail in enlistment documents might be the single biggest problem. Faced with these problems he frequently writes very cautiously in choosing who was the last veteran in each state. Frank Gryzb frequently allows that he may not have always made the right choice, but must go with the best and strongest evidence he has at this point in time.

Such modesty, caution and fair mindedness are a welcome relief after reading frequently dogmatic and angry edicts issued both for and against assorted claimants. Unfortunately very good evidence for many claimants who were almost certainly the last veterans cannot meet the strict perimetres he has set. This is not the writer's fault: very little primary source evidence from this time meets modern standards of reliability.

Another constructive aspect must be the interesting stories of the claimants themselves; they add up to a mosaic of American life before, during and after the war. Many are interesting, unusual, and unknown. Hawaii's last survivor, James Delvin (1848-1932) was one of around four hundred who survived the tragic sinking of the *Sultana,* in April 1865. With around 1,700 dead, this remains one one of the world's worst shipping disasters. Ironically Delvin would eventually work in shipping in Hawaii. Alaska's high energy John Newington Conna (c1836-1921) was born a Texan slave, served in Loisiana's Unionist Native Guards as a combatant, and then successfully took up farmimg and then mining while becoming a lawyer. He repeated his business successes in Alaska after taking up gold mining there at the age of sixty-four. Israel Adam Broadsword (1846-1952) of Idaho served in the Missouri Unionist militia before the war began, then served in the war renlisted to serve with Custer and fight Indians. Gryzb does mention Broadsword's role in the 1861 battle of Lexington when Broadsword served in the militia but not his enlistment there as being different to his 1865 one. Then there was New Hampshire's last veteran, James Luvey, probably the last survivor of Gettysburg – he served a jail term for bank robbery.

Gryzb also has an entertaining and informative section that deals with the last eyewtnesses or participants to famous Civil War events or to those last veterans who achieved prominence in different fields. Another interesting section deals with Civil War veterans who migrated overseas.

Despite the book's many virtues there are some points where I think he has made the wrong choice. Going with the majority opinion that Pleasant Crump (1847-1951) was the last Confederate combat veteran was the big one. William Albert Kinney (1846-1953) a former Confederate cavalryman from Kentucky who lived much of his life in Indiana, was probably the last Civil War combatant, outliving by three months Union infantryman James Albert Hard (1841?-1953) who here and elsewhere is usually aclaimed as the war's last fighting man. Kinney definitely had two enlistment documents for two different regiments. Other enlistments may also apply. The first, from November 1861 appears in *Official Records* and was verified by

Kentucky's Atjutant-General. The second was recorded in November 1863 on the 10th Kentucky Cavalry muster roll. Kinney also

appears in two censuses, those of 1850 and 1860. While claiming service in 1950s interviews Kinney did not apply for a pension, seek publicity or tell tall stories. Apparently he boosted his 1861 enlistment age so as to serve with older relatives. He remains unmentioned in *The Last Civil War Veterans.* He was branded a fraud in the 1990s because an Indianapolis man with the same name claimed or was given an 1861 birthdate (and also an 1864 birthdate in the same documents) when he married in 1920. Apart from the census evidence a closer examination of the 1920 marriage shows strong evidence that this was not the aged veteran.

Others were considered and if not rejected, were held askance over the nature of their evidence. William J. Bush (1846-1952) became a victim of his fading memory in the 1930s, of having too many namesakes in Georgia, of also boosting his age for an 1861 enlistment, of indecipherable faded writing on perhaps another 1862 enlistment, of comic attention seeking and having his ridiculously tall tales taken seriously. However facts remain facts. He appears under his father's name as aged four years old on an August 1850 census from Georgia. His 1861 enlistment, pay and discharge documents were verified by the Atjutant-General in 1953. Even Richard Serrano, who treats him sceptically, stated that that the pensions department eventually found Bush's militia records for his second 1864-1865 service. There was also the way Bush's Civil War photograph bore a strong resemblance to his aged photograph. He also knew several details of battles he had been in that are rarely mentioned in histories and were unlikely to be known of unless he was there.

Another problem person who probably boosted his age was William Daniel Townsend (1846?-1953). Apparently Louisiana's last veteran, he may have been involved in identity theft, but the evidence goes against it. Several assorted officially verified documents he claimed as his are for a William W. Townsend in the 27th Louisiana Infantry. One document gives his age as "21yrs." The earliest birthyear by census is 1845, so he was at the most eighteen at the time and perhaps ten. Did he indulge in the common practice of altering his name and age slightly? Probably the best evidence for this is in his muster roll where a document which reads like a tip off says that the Union Provost Marshall was looking for a William Daniel Townsend. He could also name five former Confederates he served with at Vicksburg. My search had all five names turned up in Confederate muster rolls, four of them in the seige at Vicksburg where Townsend served.

Another problem with this other Townsend, the supposed veteran emerges. If as stated he was 48 in 1910 how could he be any type of Civil War veteran, let alone Louisiana's oldest veteran? Like the date "38th January" elsewhere this must be a typo. Other errors include Lurvey's deathdate, John C. Adams being comander of a veterans' organisation and Walter Williams and Thomas Evans Riddle being definitely described as frauds. They are dubious, not disproved. Williams made some untrue statenments concerning his age and service and had his role exaggerated, much of that by others. There were enllistments which may be namesakes, but if so, some of those namesasakes'units were close to his locale - where he supposedly served in as a boy forager. Riddle's situation resembles that of Bush, but with fewer documents giving

evidence in his favour, and generally later and much more confused, more dubious claims. Bush made many creditable statements, Riddle far fewer.

Errors in this field are almost unavoidable given the nature of the primary source evidence and do not detract from this book being an important and very readable addition to the topic. Later editions of my 2013 book have over two pages of corrections and many additions and doubtless the author will have a similar section in later editions.

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