

COKER CREEK

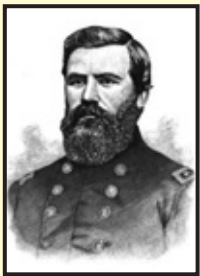


Caught in the Middle



Here in the shadow of the Unicoi Mountains, the Coker Creek community suffered the effects of the Civil War. The conflict closed the lucrative gold mines here and brought devastation and terror to the inhabitants. Both the Union and the Confederate armies foraged for supplies from long-suffering civilians, while violent vendettas between rival bushwhackers continued for years.

Both armies used the Unicoi Turnpike Trail behind you (present-day Joe Brown Highway and Tennessee State Route 68) to move soldiers and supplies. Early in December 1863, after Confederate Gen. James Longstreet abandoned his siege of Knoxville, Union Gen. William T. Sherman ordered Col. Eli Long to pursue a Confederate wagon train south along this turnpike into northern Georgia. Long captured only a few of the 300 wagons.



Col. Eli Long – Courtesy
Library of Congress

Although the battles that occurred along the East Tennessee and Georgia

Railroad did not happen here, deserters from both sides — “bushwhackers” — attacked civilians and soldiers from behind trees, rocks, and curves. Reminders of murderous brutality are evident in the Coker Creek Cemetery. Lt. James K. Morrow, 3rd Tennessee Mounted Infantry (US), was “Bushwhacked on Steer Creek Road



Reverse of James K. Morrow
tombstone – Monroe County Archives

While Cradling Oats,” according to his tombstone, five years after the war ended.

The community slowly rebuilt itself. Gold mining resumed by 1869 but never attained antebellum production levels.

“[In the Tennessee and North Carolina mountains] the warfare between scattering bodies of irregular troops is conducted on both sides without any regard whatever to the rules of civilized war or the dictates of humanity. The murder of prisoners and non-combatants in cold blood has ... become quite common [as well as] almost every other horror incident to brutal and unrestrained soldiery.” — N.C. Gov. Zebulon B. Vance



“Union Bushwhackers Attacking Rebel Cavalry,” Junius H. Browne,
Four Years in Secessia (1866)

Civil War veterans are buried in the nearby Ironsburg and Coker Creek cemeteries. These graveyards, which also hold the remains of bushwhackers and their victims, are reminders of an era when war and suffering dominated these mountains.