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# The Civil War Diary of a Common Soldier: William Wiley of the 77th Illinois Infantry

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William Wiley was typical of most soldiers who served in the armies of the North and South during the Civil War. A poorly educated farmer from Peoria, he enlisted in the summer of 1862 in the 77th Illinois Infantry, a unit that participated in most of the major campaigns waged in Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Alabama. Recognizing that the great conflict would be a defining experience in his life, Wiley attempted to maintain a diary during his years of service. Frequent illnesses kept him from the ranks for extended periods of time, and he filled the many gaps in his diary after the war. When viewed as a postwar memoir rather than a period diary, Wiley's narrative assumes great importance as it weaves a fascinating account of the army life of Billy Yank.

Rather than focus on the noble and heroic aspects of war, Wiley reveals how basic the lives of most soldiers actually were. He describes at length his experiences with sickness, both on land and at sea, and the monotony of daily military life. He seldom mentions army leaders, evidence of how little private soldiers knew of them or the larger drama in which they played a part. Instead, he writes fondly of his small circle of regimental friends, fills his pages with refreshing anecdotes, records troop movements, details contact with civilians, and describes the appearance of the countryside through which he passed. In the epilogue, Terrence J. Winschel recounts Wiley's complex and often frustrating struggle to obtain his military pension after the war.

Wiley was an ingenious misspeller, and his words are transcribed just as he wrote them more than 130 years ago. Through his simple language, we come to know and care for this common man who made a common soldier. His story transcends the barriers of time and distance, and places the reader in the midst of men who experienced both the horror and the tedium of war.

Winschel's rich annotation fleshes out Wiley's narrative and provides an enlightening historical perspective. Scholars and buffs alike, especially those fascinated by operations in the lower Mississippi Valley and along the Gulf Coast, will relish Wiley's honest portrait of the ordinary serviceman's Civil War.

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