

## COMMON SOLDIER

# The Devotion and Death of DeWitt Jobe

### A Sorting of the Facts

by Hugh F. Walker

*The tragic tale of the torture and death of Tennessee patriot and Coleman Scout, DeWitt Smith Jobe, and the equally engrossing sequel involving his avenger, cousin DeWitt Smith, are stories well-known to Middle Tennesseans. Nashville writer and historian Hugh F. Walker sorts fact from legend in the widely told and often exaggerated stories.*

Doctor Johnson had his Boswell, Sam Davis had S.A. Cunningham and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. But DeWitt Smith Jobe had nobody at all.

That makes a neat summation, but it's not quite true. Sumner A. Cunningham was editor and publisher of *Confederate Veteran* magazine (published in Nashville), and he did promote the name and fame of Sam Davis as the boy hero of the Confederacy, a young man who chose death at a rope's end rather than betray his commander and fellow scouts. It was through Cunningham's efforts that a statue of Davis stands on the grounds of the Tennessee State Capitol, and Wilcox immortalized Sam with a poem that ended: "Let glory claim the hero's name, and tell the world his worth." In recent years a Davis biography was written by Edythe Whitley.

But "Dee" Jobe's death was as heroic and self-sacrificing as that of Davis, and it was a more painful, more tortured, more demeaning death. But in dying for

his friends and cause, Jobe shared with Davis the quality of nobility.

Though Jobe's admirers were not as numerous as those of Davis, since he was not as well known, there were those who recognized his heroism and put it on record. They included his fellow members of Coleman's Scouts. Shortly after the war they published this statement:

*That while we regret with the sorrow of our inmost souls, D.S. Jobe's cruel fate, we can but recollect with pride how nobly he died—strangled, beaten and abused; yet, he defied his persecutors to the end.*

*Death makes no conquest of this conqueror, for now he lives in fame though not in life.*

As young men and boys, Davis and Jobe were neighbors and friends. Both were natives of Rutherford County, Tennessee, where the great battle of Stone's River was fought at the beginning of 1863. Both were farm boys, active and able to ride and shoot.

DeWitt Smith Jobe was born June 4, 1840 in a 2-story log cabin in the hamlet of Mechanicsville (now called Big Spring) in southwestern Rutherford County, near the Williamson County line. The house, somewhat altered and its logs boarded over, stands today on the Rocky Fork Road.

In 1861, an enthusiastic young Confederate, Dee Jobe joined a company being raised in College Grove, Williamson County, some ten miles from his home. The company later became Company D, Twentieth Tennessee Infantry Regiment. The historian of this regiment, Dr. W.J. McMurray, wrote an account of Jobe's career and death, published in 1904.

Fighting under Nashville's General Felix Zollicoffer, Jobe took part in the disastrous battle of Mill Springs, or Fishing Creek, just over the Kentucky line in January of 1862. The Confederates were defeated and scattered, and young Jobe was wounded and captured. In this



DeWitt Smith Jobe

engagement Zollicoffer was killed, and for the first time the full impact of the Civil War was felt in Middle Tennessee.

Jobe was exchanged in time to fight under Bragg in the Battle of Stone's River, only a few miles from his home. After the battle Bragg retreated a short distance south to Shelbyville, and all that spring the armies of Bragg and Rosecrans confronted each other without major action.

During this interval Jobe, who knew the country behind Federal lines, was detailed for "secret service" which in plain words must have meant spying or "scouting" in Yankee-occupied territory in the vicinity of Murfreesboro and Nashville.

In June of 1863, led by Wilder's mounted infantry firing new repeating

rifles, Rosecrans's army charged through the gaps south of Murfreesboro, out-shooting and out-maneuvering Bragg, and elbowing his Army of Tennessee out of Middle Tennessee and all the way across the Tennessee River. DeWitt Jobe did not retreat with the army, but remained on his old "stomping ground," as a member of the famed Coleman's Scouts.

Up until this time Jobe had been scouting for General William J. Hardee of Bragg's army and reporting to him, but now he reported to "E. Coleman," commander of Coleman's Scouts—except that there was no E. Coleman. The name was an alias, intended to fool the Federals. The commander was actually Henry B. Shaw, a native of Robertson County. Shaw moved in and

out of enemy lines disguised as an old herb doctor. As the summer of 1863 wore on, Federal reinforcements streamed across Tennessee to bail out Grant and Sherman after Rosecrans's defeat at Chickamauga. It was the job of the scouts, using a code known only to Shaw, to keep track of these movements and forward the information to Bragg around Chattanooga.

Miss Whitley wrote that some of the scouts "left off their uniforms, occasionally wearing citizens suits or Federal uniforms, but they were not required to do it. Many of them would wear Federal overcoats, after changing the blue by the use of walnut dye." Writing for the *Confederate Veteran* in June, 1909, Dr. H.M. Hamill of Nashville explained the operation of the scouts:

*Scouts or spy, whatever the term applied, one who enters the lines of the enemy to secretly gather information for use of the opposing army under the rules of warfare becomes a spy, and if caught is executed as a spy. There is no mawkish sentiment in war, and small mercy is shown to one who seeks to discover the secrets of the army.*

*But . . . the occupation of scouts and spies is a necessity of warfare to which any soldier is liable. One commissioned a military spy is usually chosen because of superior intelligence, courage and devotion to his army and colors. His vocation is full of deadly peril by day and night. If caught he usually dies by the most ignominious death under conditions that insure contempt in the spectators, to the end that swift judgment and odious death may deter men from seeking the office of spy. Over his supreme self-sacrifice the epitaph is commonly rendered written, "died on the gallows as a spy," without those added words which justice demands: "under military appointment and for his country's cause."*

In late August of 1864 the heat of late summer lay hard upon the land in Middle Tennessee. It was the fourth summer of the war, and the landscape was marred by burned out houses and wasted fields. The war had moved far to the south, and the Army of Tennessee, now under John Bell Hood, was fast losing its hold on Atlanta as Sherman maneuvered south of the city. Joe Wheeler's cavalry was somewhere in north Georgia, and Forrest's cavalry was in north Mississippi.

Coleman's Scouts were still operating south of Nashville, without the services of their leader, Henry Shaw. Shaw had been captured, along with Sam Davis, in the autumn of 1863, had been brought to Nashville and finally sent to a Federal prison on Johnson's Island in Lake Erie, near Sandusky, Ohio. Shaw was not released until near the end of the war, and he was replaced as commander by Alexander Gregg, a member of the Scouts.

It is not clear at this time who the Scouts were reporting to, but they moved in and out of occupied Nashville, gathering information, and relieving the Yankees of horses, revolvers, medicines or anything else that might be useful to the Confederacy, sending them south through a kind of grapevine that operated in the bushes, along the back roads and under cover of night.

Regimental historian W.J. McMurray relates that in the late summer Dec Jobe, Tom Joplin and other Scouts were scouting around College Grove, Triune and Nolensville, in Williamson County. These rural villages were about seven miles apart, and all on the Nolensville turnpike. Both Jobe and Joplin lived in the vicinity, and were perhaps finding some time to spend at home. When discovered or pursued by Yankees the

Scouts would separate and go their different ways.

On the night of August 29 Jobe rode all night, perhaps from inside the Yankee stronghold at Nashville, and about sunrise reached the home of William Moss on the Nolensville Pike, about halfway between Nolensville and Triune. It is believed that the Federals in Nashville were suspicious of Jobe, and knew he had a hiding place somewhere between the Nolensville and Franklin pikes.

There had always been some Union sympathizers in southern Middle Tennessee, and some had taken the oath of allegiance. Jobe knew he was not safe when daylight came, but he certainly felt safe in the Moss home—Moss had two sons in the Twentieth Tennessee.

Another Jobe biographer, Bromfield Ridley, wrote briefly that after breakfast Jobe fell asleep in a thicket. McMurray, in a more detailed account, says Jobe took his horse one mile west to the Sam Waters farm, and fell asleep in a cornfield. In either case, the tired young man awoke to find himself looking into the face of torture and death.

#### Accounts of Jobe's last hours and his death at the hands of a Yankee patrol

*The Jobe home on Rocky Fork Road, Rutherford County, Tennessee*



vary, but the most detailed and perhaps most accurate report appeared in *Confederate Veteran*. In its December, 1895 issue the magazine carried a letter from H.E. Jobe of Paris, Tennessee, a nephew of DeWitt Jobe. This was a decade earlier than the McMurray and Ridley reports, and it is likely that H.E. Jobe remembered his uncle's death, and had information from the family. An excerpt from his account follows, and begins by relating Jobe's successful escape after a previous capture:

*While in this [secret] service he [Jobe] was captured near Triune, and while being carried north to prison he made his escape near Louisville by jumping from the car window. He made his way back to the army, then in Georgia; was then attached to Coleman's Scouts, where he was a comrade of the brave Sam Davis.*

*On one of these scouts he went to the house of Sam Waters, between Triune and Nolensville, where he met his true and tried friend, Miss Bettie Pucket, who frequently gave him information in regard to the enemy's movement. She directed him to a thicket near by to remain during the day, where she could furnish him food for himself and horse.*

*He was gone only a short time when a squad of Federal cavalry came up in pursuit of him and accused Miss Bettie of concealing him. She endeavored to decoy them in a different direction, but seeing the tracks of his horse, they soon found him asleep in the thicket.*

*They endeavored to make him divulge some information, but failing, they put a leather strap around his neck, and two men getting hold of either end they choked and strangled him to death. Thus died another martyr to "the lost cause."*

The *Veteran* account quoted above reports the earlier capture of Jobe, not mentioned by McMurray or Ridley. Federal army records confirm that he was captured in February of 1864 and sent to Louisville. Sam Davis had been executed in the fall of the previous year. It seems unlikely that Jobe, after his escape, joined the army in Georgia, since he was not with the army when captured. In any case, he soon resumed scouting activities around Nolensville.

McMurray wrote that Jobe was carrying papers that would, if taken, have condemned himself and others, and that some thought the papers were procured for him by a sweetheart in the neighborhood. The sweetheart was undoubtedly the "tried and true" girlfriend,

Bettie Puckett, identified only in the *Veteran* letter. McMurray also wrote that Jobe was captured this last time by a 15-man mounted patrol from the 115th Ohio Infantry Regiment, commanded by "Sergeant Temple."

Looking into the guns of his captors, Jobe quickly swallowed his papers, or chewed them until they were illegible. Instead of taking him back to Nashville as they should have done, the infuriated patrol determined to make him talk, then and there.

But the Federals were dealing with a determined man, made of the same stuff as Sam Davis. He wouldn't tell them anything, and he died a slow, painful death.

Ridley wrote that the Yankees tortured Jobe to death by putting out his eyes and cutting out his tongue. McMurray wrote that they beat him over the head with their guns, knocked out his upper front teeth, and dragged him by the leather strap they had placed around his neck until he was strangled to death. (Some exaggerated accounts claim Jobe's stomach was slashed open to retrieve the papers, but there is no substantiation for this claim.)

A Tennessee Historical Commission marker on Nolensville Pike, south of Nolensville, says Jobe was captured by a patrol from the "115th Ohio Cav.," was mutilated and tortured, then dragged to

death behind a "galloping horse." But the slow tightening of the leather strap, as described in H.E. Jobe's letter to the *Veteran*, was probably more effective for the Yankees' purpose. The galloping horse, while spectacular, seems not to fit the situation. (Also, it was the 115th Ohio Infantry.)

But by one means or another, all were cruel beyond the uses of war. And the captors who left Jobe lying in the sun by the roadside disgraced themselves; it was said that they later described Jobe as the "bravest man they ever saw," but the tribute could not wash the blood from their hands. McMurray and Ridley reported that Sergeant Temple, perhaps suffering from remorse, became a "raving maniac." But the only suffering reported in his pension application was from rheumatism, which had hospitalized him in the spring of 1865. He lived to a ripe old age, dying in 1919.

As young Jobe's body lay by the road in the August sun, a woman came by and placed a handkerchief over his face.



Hugh Walker

Jobe's grave behind his home

Later in the day "Old Frank," a Jobe family slave, came in a spring wagon and took the body to the family cemetery behind the Jobe home on Rocky Fork Road, about seven miles from the spot where Jobe was killed.



\*Albert Bazendale, a member of the Confederate Society of Nashville, found from army records that the sergeant was Taylor Temple, a native of Ohio, who later claimed a disability pension from the federal government.

### An Avenging Cousin

It is in the mystery of the case of DeWitt Smith, Jobe's similar-named cousin, that the story of the life and death of DeWitt Jobe takes a strange turn. We have not all the answers, but we do have information that was not available to the historians of three quarters of a century ago.

In his history of the Twentieth Tennessee, McMurray has this account:

*DeWitt Smith, a cousin of D. H. Jobe, was a member of the 45th Tennessee Regiment in Bragg's army. When he heard of the cowardly and brutal murder of his cousin, he left his command, came into Middle Tennessee, and*

*raised the black flag, and no less than fifty Yankees paid the death penalty at the hands of this brave boy for the murder of D. S. Jobe.*

*After DeWitt Smith had waged his war of revenge for two months, he was surrounded by a company of cavalry at Nolensville, and while contending with them single-handed, he was wounded, captured and carried to Murfreesboro, twenty miles away, where they intended to hang him the next day at noon; but before the hour of execution arrived, his brave spirit took its flight from the effects of the wounds that he had received the day before.*

Bromfield Ridley's account has it:

*There is a sequel to Jobe's tragic end that in sentiment and devotion is as beautiful as that of Damon and Pythias*

*or of Jonathan and David. Jobe had a kinsman and a brother scout, Dee Smith, a neighbor and friend. When he was told of Jobe's torture and persecution he grew desperate and his mind became unhinged. He left the 45th Tennessee Regiment near Chattanooga, raised the black flag, and declared that henceforth he would never take a prisoner. It is asserted that he slew not less than 50 of his enemies. At last they surrounded him near Nolensville, Tenn. and shot him. Afterwards they brought him 20 miles from Nolensville to Murfreesboro . . . Fortunately, he died before noon of the next day, at which time he was to be hanged.*

Had these worthy historians known the whole truth about DeWitt Smith, they would have been less lyrical in their praise.

D. S. Jobe was murdered at the end of August in the summer of 1864. Both McMurray and Ridley should have known that the 45th Regiment was at that time in Atlanta, trying to defend the city against Sherman's army.

Records of the 45th Infantry Regiment show that DeWitt Smith deserted the Confederate army on September 8, 1863, almost a year before his cousin Jobe was murdered. He is then listed as a prisoner of war. On September 20, less than two weeks after he deserted, he took the oath of allegiance at Stevenson, Alabama, a town on the railroad west of Chattanooga. It was ordered by the Federals that he was to be released at Murfreesboro, on the railroad near his home. After that, the record is silent.

Where did Smith spend the following year? If he went to Nolensville, how would he explain his absence from the army? Did he desert because his mind was unhinged? It is logical, but not necessarily so, that the murder of his

cousin gave him a reason for coming home in civilian clothes—to fight a private war of revenge against the Yankees.

In the autumn of 1864 Smith had to face the fact that he was an army deserter, and his cousin had died a hero's death at the hands of the enemy. Regret, remorse, a desire for revenge may have prompted him to "raise the black flag."

Various newspaper accounts, without supporting evidence or quoted sources, say Smith armed himself with knives and pistols, slashed his victims' throats as they slept in their tents, filled a sink-hole with dead Yankees, and he was said to have been very hard on citizens around Nolensville who had taken the oath. It seems that not one of them knew he had taken the oath himself.

There are too many inconsistencies and exaggerations in the DeWitt Smith story. McMurray put him in the select company of General Thomas Benton Smith, Sam Davis and DeWitt Jobe, and then added: "Let me say that there was



Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN

*Thomas Benton Smith . . . twenty-six-year-old Rebel general, who after his capture at Nashville in December 1864 was struck over the head with a sword by Colonel William L. McMillen of the 95th Ohio. His brain damaged and exposed, Smith miraculously survived only to spend most of his remaining sixty years in a Nashville insane asylum. Thomas was a cousin of DeWitt Smith Jobe and DeWitt Smith.*

*Jobe's cousin, DeWitt Smith, who supposedly "raised the black flag" to avenge Jobe's death. It is often repeated that one of his tactics was to slip into a tent of sleeping Yankees and slit the throats of all but one . . . leaving one terror-stricken survivor to spread the story.*



Albert Basendraft

never moulded in nature's cast, better material for soldiers than these four men." The date of Smith's death is not known, nor is his place of burial. And until more information is forthcoming, if indeed it exists, the mystery of DeWitt Smith, Jobe's legendary avenger, remains unsolved.

#### Afterword

From Nolensville the Rocky Fork Road runs westward into Rutherford County. After about six miles the wooden figure of a soldier—a likeness of DeWitt Smith Jobe—tells the traveler that he has arrived at the Jobe home place. The figure, used as a mail box post, was carved with a chain saw by Ronald Reed, who lives alone in the old Jobe home, its logs now covered with asphalt siding.

"When I first saw that osage orange tree," Reed says, "I realized that I was looking at a man upside down." It was his first attempt at sculpture, and his only problem was that one arm split out during the operation and had to be bolted on.

DeWitt Jobe is buried in a family cemetery behind the old home place, but it is now on the property of Joe Spann, just across the fence from Reed's twenty acres which include the Jobe



Figure of DeWitt Smith Jobe carved from an osage orange tree by Ronald Reed, current owner of the Jobe home place

home. It is marked by a bronze plaque provided by the U.S. Government and placed by the Confederate Society of Nashville.

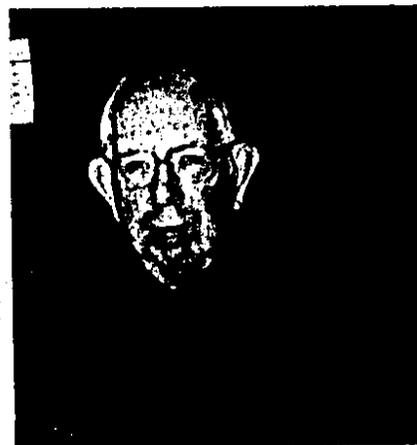
When the Society dedicated a Jobe marker in Smyrna the late Dr. Homer Pittard remarked that Jobe was "at last receiving a measure of the honor due

him." Perhaps it would be agreed, North and South, that behind the old log house, under the bronze marker, lies a good soldier and a brave American.

SOURCES: Mr. Walker's primary sources are given in the text. In addition to those, he all cites various manuscript files and military records at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

### In Memoriam

HUGH F. WALKER, 71, author of this article on DeWitt Smith Jobe, passed away February 3, 1986 in Nashville after a short illness. Mr. Walker was a retired features editor for Nashville's *The Tennessean*, official historian for Metro-Nashville and Davidson County, and a prolific writer on the Civil War in Tennessee; he taught Tennessee and Civil War history at the Watkins Institute, and served as organizer and director of the annual Tennessee Book Fair at Watkins. Mr. Walker wrote *Tennessee Tales*, a book very popular among his native state's history buffs. Last October he was selected from among 138 other nominees to receive a special commendation by the American Association for State and Local History for his twenty-five years of contributions to history, which included a 1964 special edition of *The Tennessean* about the battle of Nashville. Mr. Walker was a 1937 graduate of Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee, and a veteran of World



Verle S. Hodges

War II. He is survived by his wife, the former Cornelia Stuckey, two sons and a daughter. Hugh will be missed by a legion of friends and admirers.

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