

Montevallo Historical Society

Opening the Portals of Our Heritage

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On the Trail of Pancho Villa Marty Everse

In 1916, the United States had a real military crisis on the southern border. The Mexican Revolution had been percolating for six years, occasionally boiling over into United States territory. The incursions reached a frenzy when, in the wee morning hours of Thursday, March 9th, Pancho Villa and several hundred of his muchachos galloped into Columbus, New Mexico bent on taking muntions, money, horses and mules. The raid morphed into a battle. Houses and stores were looted and burned and about 100 of Villa's men were gunned down as well as eight U.S. cavalrymen and 10 civilians. A month later, President Woodrow Wilson ordered the army to enter Mexico and take out Villa. In June, Wilson federalized the Alabama National Guard. By August, Alabama was enlisting men for a new regiment, the First Alabama Cavalry, for duty on the border.

James G. Oakley of Ashby, a former Bibb County sheriff and a man who liked it best when lightning was striking close by, had his dander up and hustled an authorization to recruit a company, Troop K composed of men from Bibb, Shelby and Perry Counties, in the new cavalry regiment. In September, Oakley visited Montevallo and induced Ross Ellenburg, Earl Bailey, Clinton Cary, and Ollie Caldwell to join up. Ellenburg was the son of a Montevallo school teacher. Bailey, at 17, was the youngest of the recruits. Cary listed his occupation as a baseball player and Caldwell, from Wilton but working in Centreville, was a confectioner. They all soon hotfooted it

to the mobilization camp in Montgomery. The Montevallo Advertiser bid them farewell, "We wish the boys much success in Uncle Sam's army and hope they may ever be good and patriotic Americans."

For about three months that fall the men drilled, became proficient with pistols and sabers, and by all reports had a grand time. The only real drama occurred when James G. Oakley, now Captain Oakley, fell from his horse and broke his collar bone. The end of November, the regiment was reviewed by the governor and his staff. Early in December, they pushed off for the border taking up quarters in San Antonio, Texas, where Oakley again fell from his horse and broke his leg. For the following four months, the men rode around south Texas never firing a weapon in anger. Ellenburg attained the rank of Sergeant there and Bailey was appointed a trumpeter. The only heroism reported during this time was the heroic measure taken by the medical corps to stamp out hookworm that had infected fifty-five percent of the First Alabama Cavalry.

The troops arrived back in Alabama by the end of March 1917. A local paper proclaimed, "Every one of them should have a service medal to show to the world who volunteered to defend the flag – who gave up jobs, home, comfort and loved ones, and it will show those who loved these things better than the flag." But the service on the Mexican border was just a prelude to something much more serious. The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917. The men of Troop K would turn in their horses and man the cannons of the 117th Field Artillery in France.



The men of Troop K, 1st Alabama Cavalry. Captain Oakley is second from the left. The trumpeter, standing fourth from the left, may be Earl Bailey.