

# The Preacher's Tale: the Civil War Journal of Rev. Francis Springer, Chaplain, U. S. Army of the Frontier

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*The Preacher's Tale: The Civil War Journal of Rev. Francis Springer, Chaplain, U.S. Army of the Frontier*, edited by William Furry. The Civil War in the West. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001. xxiv, 182 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, index, \$34.95 paper.

Reviewer Anne C. Rose is associate professor of history and religious studies at Penn State University, University Park. Her most recent book is *Beloved Strangers: Interfaith Families in Nineteenth-Century America* (2001).

Americans typically have kept diaries only when they expected their times to be exceptional. Francis Springer's diary fits this profile. Although he lived a long and accomplished life (1810–1892), his determination to keep a journal was limited to the Civil War era. His fervent Union loyalty must have been the reason he left his post as superintendent of schools in Springfield, Illinois, to enlist in 1861, along with a seventeen-year-old son. His age (51) and status as an ordained Lutheran minister must have persuaded his superiors to appoint him a chaplain. Springer's diary for 1863, the only manuscript volume to survive, chronicles his experiences in Arkansas. This fine edition by William Furry offers one of the few eyewitness accounts of the Civil War by a member of the clergy.

Let there be no mistake: this is not a preachy tract, although Springer was a man of conviction who saw the war as a struggle for Christian civilization. His career makes clear that ordination in this era remained as much a recognition of piety and learning as professional commitment, because he spent more years as a journalist and educator than as a minister of a parish. His wartime observations matched facets of his own energetic character. Born to poor German immigrants in Pennsylvania and orphaned by age five, Springer wrote easily about common people: a young soldier dying of gangrene, a psychotic man who would not wear clothes, the "unwashed, half-clad, & school-less boys & girls" (52). A newspaper correspondent and editor on and off, he had a fine eye for detail, whether the "amusing exhibition of pompous valor" of a "crak-brained Major" or the "small groves of dwarf elms, persimmons, & cherry plums" along the "flinty road" of the army's march (5–6, 64). As a minister, of course, he was furious with army paymasters in "wonderful haste to desecrate the Sabbath by distributing U.S. Greenbacks" to soldiers more eager to drink and gamble than pray (90). He had, more deeply, unquestioned faith in Christianity's saving power. His counsel of four Confederate bushwhackers soon to be executed, seeking their repentance, underlines the special burdens of the clergy in combat.

In Springer's life and diary, sacred and secular intermixed as they did in the American culture of his time. His journal casts light on other

historical questions as well. Were Civil War soldiers inspired by political ideas, or just practical thoughts about protection of property and home? Springer, for one, measured all he saw by the tenets of the Republican Party—education, labor, democracy—and found the South wanting. He even followed Republican thinking on race: citizenship and subordination alike were appropriate, he believed, for dark-skinned people of a different species than he. How, we may also wonder, did war vary from region to region? Occupied Arkansas, in Springer's eyes, was an unnerving patchwork of Union loyalists, "Secesh" hotheads, repentant former Confederates, and simple victims, such as the wives driven to "madness" ("violent fits of weeping & exclamatory utterances of the most despairing anguish") over the fate of their men (93). Perhaps this confusion was typical of the war on its geographic margins.

This is a personal book for William Furry. His great-great-grandmother, a war orphan, found a home through the charitable efforts of Francis Springer. The diary itself afforded Springer a personal space—a "woodshed," in Furry's words—to sort through the issues of war (xxiii). These private commitments put a special stamp on the social panorama of wartime Arkansas that Springer recorded. As readers, we are invited to see the history of this troubled time from a perspective marked by unusual sensitivity and discernment.

*The American West: A New Interpretive History*, by Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. x, 616 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Michael Steiner is assistant professor of history and director of the social science education program at Northwest Missouri State University. He is the author of articles on the Farmers' Alliance, Japanese Americans in the West, and populism in Missouri.

For a long time teachers of the American West have had difficulty finding a general text dealing with western development that takes into account the complex body of new work on western history in a balanced and readable narrative. Standards in the field, such as Billington and Ridge's classic work, reduced the drama, excitement, and creative development of the West into detailed but narrow descriptions of the westward expansion of Anglo-American achievement. The alternatives published in the past three decades have been engaging and varied contributions to a "new" western history, usually focused on special topics rather than intended as general works. Fortunately, this new western history is now being synthesized into a handful of

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