Limber Jim of Andersonville: A Note on Annotation

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annotation enhances the value of documentary editions, which is in part why early publications without such notes frequently confused readers, especially those with limited background knowledge. In modern documentary editions annotations provide important historical references, which means that misidentifications, especially when copied repeatedly, can have lasting negative impact.

Annotations often require seeking credible information on the obscure and elusive. Providing a single correct identification can require much effort. With limited time and staff, editors face difficult decisions in how much energy to spend in such instances. As with all aspects of documentary editing, identifying individuals, events, or places must relate proportionately to their respective importance in the text. Consequently, considerable effort may be expended to provide information on a single obscure fact because of its significance in the document while other less important items receive less attention.

Editors must also make other tough decisions. Some documentary projects require little annotation while others need much explanation. Additional questions arise from constraints other than editorial concerns such as space limitations set by the press.

Providing historical reference to “Limber Jim” illustrates those annotation problems. He appeared as a major character in dozens of books and unpublished memoirs relating to Camp Sumter, the infamous Civil War prison known popularly as Andersonville, in Sumter County, Georgia. Typically, little dispute, however, about the results of internment in Andersonville. Of the 40,000 men who entered through the prison gates between February 1864 and May 1865, one-third are buried in what is now Andersonville National Cemetery, victims of starvation, sickness, exposure, and broken spirits. One veteran claimed that only 800 to 900 former prisoners were still living in 1890, which is another indication of the horrendous conditions at Andersonville.

Limber Jim’s role in Andersonville’s history deserves a note of explanation, if only because his story has appeared in all formal histories of Andersonville and also in the recent movie about the infamous prison. When gangs of prisoners robbed other starving inmates, Jim helped to end such banditry. On 11 July 1864 he personally hanged a leader of the raiders who had once robbed him, literally, while he had his pants down. This heroic version of his story is in contrast to accusations that, as prisoners of war, the men of Andersonville were stragglers, cowards, or, at the least,
something less than soldiers. Yet Jim's story became part of an unsuccessful national campaign to help former prisoners win veterans benefits as POWs. For others, he came to symbolize how civilized men thrust into a savage environment can impose rules of law and justice.

Finding Limber Jim

Why then does Jim's identification present a problem? For reasons not currently understood, he successfully hid his identity during a "golden age" of aliases. The term "confidence man" first came into use in 1849, when it referred to dishonest persons who used the nation's expanded transportation network to commit fraud under invented identities. Widely available cheap fiction became manuals for those members of an increasingly literate public who wanted new lives for themselves. Persons assumed middle names and initials or took altogether new names to change their identity. (Laws against such practices did not exist.) So many people aimed at a "multiplicity of individual personalities" that it affected public faith in middle-class respectability. The expansion of the R. G. Dun and John M. Bradstreet companies into nationwide networks for credit reporting in the late 1840s, the founding of Allan Pinkerton's national security agency, and the expanded use of city directories all reflected growing problems that occurred because people moved around and changed their names.

The war of 1861-1865 further complicated this already confusing situation. Almost five million men under arms created huge mobile communities that provided soldiers with work, pay, sustenance, and anonymity. Recruiting officers acted in ignorance and with indifference when it came to the past of particular individuals. The war could hide men, and even women disguised as men.

Without knowing Limber Jim's identity, we also cannot find out why he kept his past a secret. There are several possible explanations. Hiding one's true identity may have been a common practice in Andersonville. Jack Lundquist has compiled information on almost all of the known inmates at Andersonville. He has identified 631 names of men in the camp's cemetery for whom no official service record exists in their respective recorded units. Lundquist also has 1,205 names of men reported as having been buried in the cemetery but for whom no grave has been found. Subtracting the 533 graves marked unknown from that latter number leaves 673 men, almost equal to the previously mentioned number of graves of soldiers not found to have any service record. These statistics imply that almost 700 men with false identities rest among the 13,000 graves at Andersonville.

We know some of the reasons for the inmates' assuming new identities. Felix DeLabaume, for example, hid his past as deserter Ben Dykes. Similarly, Soren Peterson knew a fellow Dane called "Sandy," a prisoner sutler like Limber Jim. Sandy had enlisted and deserted from the federal army twice before in order to collect repeated enlistment bounties. Jim Mallory regularly escaped to federal lines, only eventually to find himself back at Andersonville each time. James R. Compton thought that Mallory was some sort of a spy. No prison record of Mallory exists. Civilian John H. Morris of Herkimer County, New York, also does not appear in the records although Confederate Captain Henry Wirz mentioned him in a letter. He may have been missed deliberately as he profitably collaborated with the rebels by buying securities from prisoners at low prices paid in Confederate money. Limber Jim may have also been a rebel collaborator.

Many men at Andersonville used nicknames so that their real names were often not remembered, if ever generally known. Prisoner John "Bugler" Ransom wrote that "John Smith" and "numerous" of his family lived in Andersonville. Ransom knew Minnesota, Big Charlie, Little Jim, Marine Jack, Indiana Feller, Mopey, Skinny, Smarty, Dad, and Doc. Seemingly all ethnic white men not of German descent were known as "Frenchy." Even visitors to the prison used aliases. "Limber Jim" served as a common sobriquet for acrobats, freaks, and long-limbed men in the nineteenth century. Limber could also refer to the holes cut in a ship's deck for drainage of the pumps or to a wagon limber maker. Andersonville alumnus Melvin Grigsby remembered Jim as involved with a circus.

Few original, contemporary records from Andersonville survive and those that do exist include no mention of Limber Jim nor any clues to his identity. Even the incomplete prisoner lists prove of little help in providing some identification since none of them contains aliases or nicknames.
Picking Out the Real Limber Jim

Despite the lack of records, the diligent researcher faces no shortage of identification claims for Limber Jim. Many survivors of Andersonville boasted of having known the legendary executioner. Veterans making this claim increased their self-importance and the credibility of their postwar memoirs.

However, the various accounts conflict so much as to offer no credible single account of the man nicknamed Limber Jim. For example, one veteran wrote of him as a gigantic Pennsylvanian, while Charlie Mosher called him a Kentuckian. The major accounts of the “monarch” of Andersonville are summed up as follows:

1) Prisoner Michael Regan gave a less than heroic account of Limber Jim, whom he recalled knowing at Cahaba prison in Alabama. According to Regan, this mystery man had been captured as a civilian sutler. At Cahaba he informed on at least two escape attempts. His fellow inmates beat him nearly to death. Jim later volunteered to execute the raiders in exchange for release from Andersonville. Regan, who successfully escaped from Cahaba, later met Limber Jim in Cheyenne, Wyoming, where he claimed that the latter died in June 1867 from a gunshot incurred at a gambling table. James H. Buckley remembered civilian and former ninety-three) form with a sailor’s hat. Unfortunately, no service record of organizing the suppression of the raiders. Key was a leader in

2) Hoster describing him as combining an artilleryman’s uniform with a sailor’s hat. Unfortunately, no service record of any such Williams has been found.

3) One survivor of Andersonville stated, and another implied, that Limber Jim was Leroy L. Key, a leader in organizing the suppression of the raiders. Key was a Mississippi-born member of an old Georgia family. The guards at Andersonville were hard on Southerners caught in the federal army. Some of the prisoners gave men like Key new identities in northern units as a means of protection.

However, Leroy Key, in his own writings, made no claim to being the legendary executioner. John McElroy, Lessel Long, and other prisoners remembered him and Limber Jim as different men. McElroy, the prison’s postwar historian, should have known the facts as he served with Key in the Sixteenth Illinois Cavalry and also as an inmate at Andersonville.

4) Of Limber Jim, the above-mentioned John McElroy wrote that he had been a member of the Sixty-seventh Illinois Infantry and fellow POW James Madison Page identified Limber Jim as “James Laughlin.” A James McLaughlin did serve in that unit before enlisting in the First Illinois Light Artillery. John L. Hoster’s memory of Limber Jim as wearing an artilleryman’s uniform supports that claim. (However, inmates at Andersonville stripped the dead for clothes.) The nickname Limber Jim might have come from the limber on an artillery piece.

James McLaughlin, however, did not fall into rebel captivity until 27 November 1864, long after the raiders executed. He almost certainly never saw Andersonville. Limber Jim might have known McLaughlin and assumed his identity, perhaps only to obtain another ration by answering the roll twice. Herman J. Peters used this ruse as “John Kate” and knew other prisoners who used the same tactic.

5) One man, however, eventually did come forward as Limber Jim. In 1889, Henry Harrison Rood published a history of his Company A of the Thirteenth Iowa Infantry Regiment and, eight years later, prepared a paper on this same subject. In both publications he included a biography of Vincent Ferguson “Limber Jim” Stevens of Andersonville. As several members of the company were veterans of the prison, Rood had the opportunity for being corrected. In 1897, Stevens himself gave a talk about his experiences as Limber Jim. He explained how he had obtained his nickname because of his acrobatics and how he had helped suppress the raiders.

However, even this identification of Vincent Ferguson “Limber Jim” Stevens does not exclude the possibility of misidentification. Other individuals of the era identified themselves as Davy Crocket, Billy the Kid, Jesse James, and Butch Cassidy, and even claimed to live under aliases after surviving widely reported deaths. Stevens could also have falsely claimed the mantle of a legend, especially since eulogists of former prisoners Pete McCullough, E. W. Nichols, and Abel Wadsworth Payne similarly credited each of these men with the role of executioner of the Andersonville raiders.
If Stevens’ claims are false, he assumed the odd position of being the hustler whom Rood remembered but who himself publicly assumed the identity of another con man in order to conceal his real self. If Stevens was Limber Jim, he successfully hid his real name, making use of the confusion created by crediting various other men as the Andersonville hangman.

6) To complicate matters, it is also probable that ethnicsounding physical descriptions point to a mixed racial origin of the man in question and suggest the possibility that “Limber Jim” was his true given name because the obsolete word “limmer” meant mongrel. According to Dr. Karen S. Walker, the confusion over Limber Jim’s identity could come from his existence in a marginal part of society, beyond the experience of the prisoners trying to describe him.

Annotation for Limber Jim

The above summation takes the issue of Limber Jim’s identity further than ever before and far beyond efforts usually made for one annotation. No publication of an Andersonville manuscript that made mention of Limber Jim would include all of the available data because that would be to ignore S. P. Zitner’s warning to consider only questions “immediately relevant to an understanding of the text.” An editor has to weigh all of the previously listed possible descriptions and decide whether to include a reference at all or whether to include into the note only the most generally accepted facts about Limber Jim with the proviso that “positive identity remains uncertain.” Taking Zitner’s warning to heart, all that we credibly know about Limber Jim is part of the general history of Andersonville and hence appropriate for annotation purposes in documentary editing. Whoever else he may have been or whatever else he may have done belongs elsewhere.

Notes

The author wishes to acknowledge the help provided by Richard Sauers.

1. For discussions of the value of annotation, and even the pitfalls of excessive documentation, see the sources cited on the subject in Beth Luey, Editing Documents and Texts: An Annotated Bibliography (Madison, Wis.: Madison House Pub., 1990), Robert Manson Myers annotated the people mentioned in his Children of Pride as an encyclopedia-style appendix. His identifications were so detailed that, at my suggestion, he later also published them as a separate book. See Myers, Children of Pride: Many Mansions (New York: Popular Library, 1977).


9. Marvel, Andersonville, 244; “War Story of Soren Peterson,”


24. *Daily Intelligencer* (Adrian, Mo.), 6 December 1915; “Hanged For Being Hungry,” unidentified 1890 newspaper article in Louis Manigault Scrapbook, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.