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# JOHN HUNT MORGAN



*John H. Morgan*

## A SOUTHERN LEGEND

BY DAVID RAY SKINNER



**M**y introduction to John Hunt Morgan was through the pages of a book that was given to me when I was thirteen. The book was *The Civil War in Middle Tennessee*, a reprint of a series by Ed Huddleston, originally published in four separate supplements in the *Nashville Banner* to commemorate the war's centennial years. Huddleston's exciting accounts of John Morgan and his raiders sparked my thirteen-year-old imagination and launched a lifelong fascination with the general and his exploits. But, after writing numerous history papers on Morgan throughout my junior and senior high years and encountering puzzled looks from my teachers, along with sidebar comments like, "Stick to more well-known generals," I became convinced that I was obsessed with a fairly obscure character. Once I got to college (in East Tennessee) I discovered that the war in Middle Tennessee took a back seat to the more famous hot spots of Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Atlanta, and even Shiloh, a tiny church just beyond the western boundary of Middle Tennessee. And even though Morgan was at Shiloh, his story has somehow gotten lost in the shuffle of years along with Middle Tennessee's role in the war. The songs in this collection were written over a period of time, starting in 1975. Over the years, I added songs one by one, but without the single concept that the collection eventually evolved into. Then, as luck (or fate) would have it, one Sunday morning several years ago, after a *Dog & Pony* concert in Black Mountain, N.C., a book review in the Asheville Sunday paper's literary section caught my eye. The book, *Rebel Raider: The Life of General John Hunt Morgan* by James A. Ramage was reviewed favorably and, what's more, spoke of Morgan in matter-of-factly terms as opposed to referring to him as historically obscure. The review focused on Morgan's shift of attention from his men to his warbride, Mattie Ready. I tore out the review and put it in a safe place and eventually forgot about it.

With the advent of Ken Burns's outstanding documentary, *The Civil War*, I noticed an upsurge in interest in the war. I started getting calls from friends such as *The Dog & Pony Band*'s Michael Thornburgh (who played fiddle on "Butternut Grey," an old *Dog &*

*Pony* chestnut) and Nashville songwriter, Lee Owens (who would eventually help engineer the final mix), and they all were suggesting I finish my "20-year John Morgan Project." Amazingly, the long-lost torn out book review from the Asheville Sunday paper re-appeared, and I was able to track down a copy of James Ramage's book. And, because I was so taken with the way he brought Morgan to life, I eventually tracked down James Ramage, himself. He became a creative sounding board for this project and helped me get my hands on Morgan's prison love letters to Mattie. Professor Ramage and other Civil War historians such as Steve Batson (Travelers Rest's own museum) proved to be very helpful, both as sources of information and as creative consultants. Music-wise, Bruce Bossert, Roger Redmon, and the aforementioned Lee Owens lent their expertise to the final mix. (Bossert's Mid-Coast Studio, where we mixed most of the tracks, is a few miles from Gallatin, Tennessee and just a few hills away from the L&N's famed twin tunnels that Morgan destroyed.) The collection was mastered at Twelve Oaks Studio under the watchful ears of John Carrozza. I started recording these songs on Labor Day, 1991 and finished a year later, to the day. However, this was only the culmination of a 27-year fascination. Writing and recording the songs took me back to that impressionable thirteen-year-old. I also remembered the sadness I felt every time I got to the part where Morgan was killed. (Every time I read the account, I hoped that somehow Morgan would manage to get away.) When I began this project, I also felt the same old frustration (from my junior and senior high school days) when I explained to people who and what the Morgan project was all about. But gradually, I realized that John Hunt Morgan's obscurity was really the crux of the project's intent. Morgan was one of the most celebrated and best-loved generals of his time—and now, more than 130 years later, he is one of the most unknown and unremembered.

Fame and fortune are relative concepts, and that's really the point. Time and history have their own selective ways of building up and tearing down, of remembering and forgetting.

David Ray Skinner

## Introduction

John Hunt Morgan was killed September 4, 1864, by a Confederate-turned-Yankee soldier. He had served in the Mexican War and then settled down in Kentucky, running a hemp factory and organizing the Lexington Rifles, a pro-Southern militia. This follows Morgan's life during that explosive period, beginning in October of 1861, when he joined the Confederate army, and it ends with that fateful bullet.

## Becky

Morgan married his business partner's sister, Rebecca Bruce in 1848. Becky became ill, and Morgan took her from doctor to doctor, traveling everywhere from New Orleans to Hot Springs in search of a cure, but to no avail. After years of constant pain, she died in July of 1861.

## Oh Kentucky! Ride Away

In 1861, Kentucky remained neutral. Morgan, like most Kentuckians, was forced to choose sides. As a pro-Southern business owner, he flew a rebel flag over his factory, and as the commander of a militia, he was clearly a threat to the Union. When he smuggled militia rifles out of town, leaving empty crates for the Federals to "confiscate," his arrest warrant was issued. He lost his factory, and having already lost his wife, he had nothing to live for but the new republic.

## Butternut Grey

Morgan joined the Confederacy and assumed his command in the Autumn of 1861. He was eventually joined by his brothers, Tom (who had enlisted in early July of 1861), Cal, Charlton, Dick, and later on, Key. The term *Butternut Grey* refers to the color of the Confederate uniforms, dyed from the bark of the butternut tree.

## Cheer, Boys, Cheer

This was the Kentucky marching song, and was one of the tunes that Morgan's men loved to sing going into battle.

## Lightning on the Wire/Communication Breakdown

George Ellsworth was the Canadian telegraph operator Morgan enlisted to confuse the enemy by disrupting their lines of communication. He would "milk the wires" for intelligence and then send deceptive messages to the Union command. During one raid, he tapped the line during a thunderstorm earning himself the name, "Lightning."

## Asylum Raid

When Morgan learned that the 4th Ohio had camped out on the grounds of the Lunatic Asylum, outside Nashville, he and his men disguised themselves in blue and picked off the unsuspecting Yankees. After taking over 80 prisoners, the ploy was discovered, resulting in a skirmish in the shadow of the asylum.

## Morgan's War-Song

This was a poem written by Gen. Basil W. Duke, Morgan's brother-in-law and second-in-command. When Morgan liberated Hartsville, Tennessee from Union occupation, he found an abandoned newspaper office and set up his own newspaper, *The Vidette*. *The Vidette* featured stories of Union atrocities, accounts of Morgan's "brilliant" activities, and on the front page, "Morgan's War-Song."

## Black Clouds Above the L&N

This song was taken from Basil Duke's *History of Morgan's Cavalry*, published in 1867, and is written from Duke's perspective. It focuses on two of Morgan's raids on the L&N Railroad, the main supply line for Union-occupied Nashville. The first raid was on the L&N's twin tunnels above Gallatin, Tennessee. Morgan's men (along with some of the townspeople) piled cross-ties and chunks of wood across the tracks inside the south tunnel and sent a captured locomotive with a full head of steam plowing into the debris. The resulting explosion ignited a vein of coal in the tunnel's ceiling, closing it down for 98 days. A few days later, Morgan had to rescue the old men and young boys of Gallatin who were being marched to prison by the furious Yankees.

The second raid was Morgan's infamous Christmas Raid of 1862 when he successfully captured and burned several L&N bridges and more important, the Muldraugh trestles. Next to the Gallatin tunnels, the trestles were the L&N's most strategic target, and by destroying them, Morgan shut down the supply line for five weeks. After the war, Duke practiced law and, ironically, became chief counsel and lobbyist for the L&N, helping them establish the railroad as a monopoly throughout the South.

### **The Congressman's Daughter**

In the process of establishing his headquarters at Murfreesboro, Morgan became acquainted with Col. Charles Ready, a prominent attorney and former U.S. Congressman. Morgan, in fact, was quite taken with Ready's daughter, Mattie, and after a brief courtship, they became engaged in March of 1862. They were married the following December, after which Morgan immediately left on his Christmas raid. The die was cast; his recklessness and devotion to his men would gradually be replaced by his love for Mattie.

### **Half-Past Chattanooga**

Morgan conducted several successful raids, but the most famous, if ill-fated, was his Ohio raid. With plans to link up with Lee in Pennsylvania, he set out with 2500 men on an operation that he had kept secret from his superiors. Aided by Ellsworth's telegraph dispatches of disinformation, Morgan tore his way through Kentucky and Indiana, burning bridges and ripping up railroad tracks. By the time he crossed into Ohio, he was being pursued by a number of Union regiments, and still he pushed northward. He had planned to create havoc among the general population, bringing the war to the people of the North, then cross the Ohio River and escape. Unfortunately, because of heavy rains, the river level was at a record high and, in Pennsylvania, Lee was defeated at Gettysburg. After going further north than any other Southern force and destroying several million dollars worth of property, Morgan was captured a mere 90 miles from Lake Erie.

### **Mattie's Eyes**

This song was taken from the letters Morgan wrote to Mattie from the prison in Ohio. There were many letters penned by the light of a candle or lantern as he wrote through the night, and they were poetic and full of love for Mattie and their expected child.

### **Psalms 60/142**

As a devoted churchgoer, Mattie began to draw Morgan into the church. His Bible proved to be a great comfort to him during his imprisonment. In one of his letters he confided to her that he had been studying the Psalms. The verse, "Judah is my lawgiver," is mentioned several times throughout the Psalms. Morgan may have found it ironic; Gen. Henry M. Judah was one of the Union officers who finally succeeded in trapping him.

### **Stars and Bars**

*Stars and Bars*, a nickname for the Confederate flag, is Capt. Samuel Taylor's story. Taylor was one of Morgan's officers and was captured with him in Ohio. The authorities refused to treat Morgan and his men as prisoners of war and confined them to the Ohio State Penitentiary. Several escape plans were considered, but then, Capt. Thomas H. Hines, surmising that an airshaft ran below their cells, proposed a plan for a tunnel. They carefully scraped through the concrete floor in one of the cells, hiding the small pieces in the bed ticking and the larger pieces in the furnace and in the carpetbag covering the hole. Once in the airshaft, they dug upward into six other cells and stopped short of breaking through, leaving a fraction of an inch of concrete on the cell floors that could easily be broken on the night of the escape. Because the outside yard was also guarded at night by vicious dogs, they knew they would have to wait for a rainy night, when the dogs would be inside. But, when they heard of a prison command change, they knew there would be a detailed inspection of the cells (which would have certainly revealed the hole in the cell floors, not to mention the tunnel), so they put their escape plan into action the following evening. Fortunately, it happened to rain that night, November 27, 1863, and Morgan,

Taylor, Hines, and four other men escaped. Five of the men, including Morgan, successfully made it back to Tennessee, but Sam Taylor and another of the escapees were captured.

### **This Southbound Train**

Morgan and his men had hidden civilian clothes and money inside the tunnel along with a railroad timetable. Once in the tunnel, the seven men separated into groups. Morgan and Thomas Hines paired off and caught the midnight train out of Columbus. Morgan promptly befriended a Union officer and sat beside him for the duration of the trip. As the train rolled past the penitentiary, the Union officer said, "There's the 'hotel' where Morgan and his officers are spending their leisure." Morgan laughed and said, "Yes, I hope he stays as safe as he is now."

### **The Gypsy's Letter**

Morgan received a letter from a woman in Kentucky he didn't know. The woman begged Morgan to stay put—she warned that if he attempted to come south and continue his raids, his life would be in grave danger. Morgan chose to ignore the advice and headed toward East Tennessee.

### **Cheer, Boys, Cheer**

Once back South, Morgan's military career faltered. Because of his unauthorized raid into Ohio, his superior officers not only didn't trust him, they actively sought to court-martial him. Plus, the Union Army, embarrassed and furious over his escape, vowed to recapture him, dead or alive. Here, the raiders' marching song is played as a lament.

### **The Other Side**

This was written as an Appalachian folk hymn. Here, it's a premonition for Morgan and his men.

### **The Greene County Line**

On September 4, 1864, Morgan and his men were surprised by Union troops in Greeneville, Tennessee. Morgan had promised Mattie that he would never again be taken prisoner and was shot in the back as

he ran for his horse. Morgan's brother-in-law, Basil Duke, assumed command of the remnant of his ragtag cavalry and survived until the end of the war. They eventually escorted Confederate President Jefferson Davis to the banks of the Savannah River on the Georgia-South Carolina line, where they divided up the last gold of the Confederacy. Trapped and left with no escape, they surrendered a few days later. Morgan left a widow and a daughter, Johnnie, who was born a few months after his death.

Produced by **David Ray Skinner**

All songs written by **David Ray Skinner**

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"Morgan's War-Song" (words by **Basil W. Duke**, General, C.S.A., and music by **David Ray Skinner**)

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and "Cheer, Boys, Cheer" (traditional)

All vocals & instruments by **David Ray Skinner** except

**Michael Thornburgh**, fiddle on "Butternut Grey"

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by **Bruce Bossert, Roger Redmon, and Lee Owens**

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Morgan and his men on the courthouse square in Paris, Kentucky

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