

Ella Mayfield's

Pawpaw Militia

A Civil War Saga in Vernon Co., Mo.



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All strong willed, independent woman, all Ella Mayfield wanted was to keep her widowed mother and siblings safe during the Civil War. Invasions by Union soldiers and Kansas Jawhawkers into Vernon County Missouri forced Ella to join the Pawpaw Bushwhacker band. Brave and daring, Ella dressed as a man, was a crack shot and a superb horsewoman. Her dangerous exploits are legendary, trying to protect her family and home near Montevallo, Missouri.

Chapter 1

Ella Mayfield was a pretty girl, but men seldom noticed so awed were they by her horsemanship and shooting skills. That's the way Ella liked it. Her slim frame, dressed in a man's faded, blue shirt and brown trousers, gave her a boyish look.

A flurry of dry leaves rustled along the ground and swirled past her thin, trousers legs. They bounced off her scuffed and cracked leather shoes, settling in a pile against the cabin foundation. Dandy day for hog killing all right. A proper chill in the air for October of 1859. Surely chillier than she cared for, but the seasons was one thing she didn't have a say about. She pulled her brown, broad brimmed hat down tighter on her head and hugged herself, rubbing the goose bumps off her arms.

Ella wondered if anyone else in her family dreaded when hog butchering day came around as much as she did. Most likely this was a day just like any other to the rest. Considered hard work made light by many hands. Took a lot of meat for a family as large as theirs to make it through the winter.

When the time came for butchering, Ella's brother, Brice, sent word by brother, Crack, across McCarty's Branch near Bellamy to the Gabberts, Bill and Rebecca, both in their mid forties. Ella's 20 year old sister, Leonora, was married to 24 year old John, the eldest Gabbert child. There were seven more younguns in that family so far. Ella's friend, Eliza, 20, Peter, 17, Jefferson, 15, Mary, 9, Martha, 7, William, 4, and baby Elija. Ella figured the Mayfields and the Gabberts were like most families around Montevallo, Missouri. They multiplied like flies.

Her mother, Justine, was 45 years old and had seven younguns. Ella, 26, was the eldest. Right after her came Brice, 24. A while back, he brought home a wife, Margaret, 18. She was a quiet, young girl, plain and mousy. When spoken to she rarely did more than smile or duck her head bashfully. Ella couldn't figure out what Brice saw in that girl. She didn't look to have any gumption.

The Mayfields didn't gain anything, as far as one less mouth to feed after Brice brought home Margaret. Before Leonora in age was Sallie, 22, who left home when she was thirteen to married D.P. McGiboney. The littlest younguns at home were, Tennessee and Jane. They were thirteen and twelve.

Since their father, John, died, Ella didn't expect to share her bed with any more sisters unless her mother took up with another man. That thought no sooner entered Ella's mind then she scolded herself. Ma would never do that, at lease until she got over Pa's death. Ella hoped that happened long past Jestine's child bearing years. It was hard enough to keep food on the table for the size family they had at the moment.

Absentmindedly, Ella tucked a stray hair blowing in her face under her hat

and behind her left ear. Her shoulder length, dark brown hair hung straight. At the moment, her eyes, black as a crow's when nothing bothered her, glowed like red embers on a smoldering lump of coal. Her sun browned skin, high cheekbones and full lips once in a while caused Ma to tease her about being kin to Indians. Once, Ella asked how that could be. Jistine looked all innocent. She guessed that bloodline came from Pa's side of the family since Ella favored him. If there was an Indian in the Mayfield family tree, Pa took that secret to the grave with him. With that said, Ma smiled sly like.

Pa never kept secrets from his wife, but Ella didn't dare question her mother anymore. She was afraid of what she would find out. Anything was possible in this country. The Osage Indian village was ten miles northeast of Nevada City. Wasn't unusual to hear men talk about taking a fancy to a squaw. Could have happened easily if Pa's family lived near any Indians in Tennessee. Just as well she didn't know such a thing as that about her own father, since Indian blood was something no one wanted to claim. The thought of that to most folks was as bad as a body having Negro blood. Didn't dare talk about that either if you knew what was good for you.

She reached for a sturdy stick leaned against the maple tree and stabbed at the thin layer of ice in the hound dogs drinking bucket. All the while envy welled up in her as she eyed the backs of Brice, Crack and their friend, Duck Phillips, headed for the timber. How in the world did Duck managed to always show up when food was involved? It's a good thing Crack didn't feel sorry for ever homesteading bachelor in Vernon County. A single man hurried the emptying of a family's larder if invited often enough. The tall man had raw bone, good looks with swarthy skin, darkened from exposure to the elements, but that was all Ella could think to say good about him. He had the manners of a goat.

Brice had dark brown hair and dark eyes like most of the Mayfield younguns. As a child, he always took life too seriously. That trait worsened after he married and became head of the May- field household. His gravely voice sure reminded her of Pa.

Crack, on the other hand, had no intention of settling down right away. A mischievous twinkle lit his brown eyes most of the time, aimed at ever pretty girl within miles of Montevallo, Missouri. The youthful timbre to his voice held a reminder of the childhood he had just about left behind.

Each man toted a sharps rifle. They figured on doing the hog kill. Wouldn't be such a hard job since the hogs had been baited at the edge of the timber with sour mash for a few days. Manner of fact, she didn't see why she couldn't try her hand at shooting a hog. She had years of practice hunting on her own. In fact, she considered herself a better shot than her brothers.

Ella darted past D. P., Bill Gabbert and his boys, John, Pete and Jeff, busy

preparing the butchering setup in the yard. She burst through the cabin door. Jestine looked up from mixing cornbread batter. Ella bet the thought occurred to Ma that her eldest daughter moved with the quietness of a wild Indian sometimes, but other times like a mad cow on a rampage and never like a lady.

Rebecca Gabbert, a tiny wren of a woman, stopped stirring a simmering, stew pot. With the soup ladle in mid air, she twisted to see what the racket was all about. At the end of the table, Eliza and Margaret gave Ella a slight, curious nod. To get a head start on kitchen cleanup, Eliza was washing what dishes they had already dirtied while Margaret dried.

Leonora continued to peel potatoes, frowning her disapproval at Ella from under her bent head. Ella knew that look. Leonora thought she should be helping the women. Only Sallie gave her a kindly smile. How much better off this tremulous world would be right now if everyone had the patience and kindness for people her fair haired, pretty sister did.

“What’s yer hurry, gal?” Widow Mayfield asked, watching Ella’s face closely. Even after raising a big family and working hard along side her husband, she seemed younger than most women her age. Ella admired the fact that Ma could work anyone’s hind end off.

Jestine had an unfailing quickness for sensing when something was up with one of the family, good or bad. She’d turn her piercing eyes on one of her younguns and stare what was wrong out of them. When it didn’t suit Ella for Ma to know what was going on, she was leery of that trait. She tried to stay clear of Jestine when she knew her mother would disapprove, but there was no way around it this time.

“Goin’ to take Pa’s gun out for a spell.” Ella replied, snatching the sharps rifle from the corner.

“Whatever fer?” Narrowing her hazel eyes, Jestine lifted the cornmeal coated spoon out of the gray, crock bowl. She hit it on the rim to dislodge the batter while she stared a hole through Ella.

“Thought maybe I’d hep the men shoot the hawgs,” Ella answered quickly on her way out the door. She knew better than to stick around and discuss the subject. Ma would try to talk her out of going. Men’s work was a lot more exciting and fun than women’s work. That’s all there was to it. Besides the kitchen was crowded with working women. They didn’t need her.

Ella followed the beaten down path along the end of the cornfield, now rows of corn stubs and shocks. Pa loved this wilderness he chose to homestead. He always said that God made Heaven and dropped a bit of it right there in the hills of southern Missouri. She agreed with him. Shoulder high prairie grass ran along

the creeks and bottoms for cattle and horses to graze. There was fertile land a plenty to clear and plant crops on. Timbered hills full of game to hunt along with prowling bobcats, panthers and wolves to watch out for. Water holes to fish in. In season, all sorts of food to pick, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, gooseberries, currants, mushrooms, grapes, plums, pawpaws plus hickory, pecans and walnuts a plenty.

She came into view of the three men squatted down in the prairie grass. Just their heads and shoulders showed. Light footed, she slipped up as close as she dared. Lined up and down on their knees, they were spaced a few feet apart. Each man aimed at one of the three thick, wiry haired hogs. Unaware that humans were near, the hogs routed with their long snouts to slurp up the sour mash out of the tromped grass. Wasn't a fourth hog for Ella. She curled her lips sideways in a disappointed snarl and leaned back against a hickory tree.

Ella fondly admired the timber top in autumn dress, afire with blended ambers, oranges and crimson. Fall usually was a colorful sight to behold until the leaves browned. All too soon the leaves dropped and left the trees naked and ugly as plucked chicken. After five years of drought, the trees suffered from lack of water, loosing half their leaves early or died. This long, dry spell sure was a worry to the farmers.

High in a tree, a mockingbird mimicked other birds. A quail covey's bobwhite calls mixed with the hogs sniffing and soft grunts. The sun glinted on the rifle barrels lifted above the wavering grass. The guns exploded at the same time, filling the air with puffs of arid gun smoke. Squealing screams rent the silence. Two of the hogs dropped. The sow Crack shot squealed in pain. She shook her long snout from side to side and staggered for the underbrush. Ella saw her chance. She took aim and fired. The hog lunged forward and dropped.

The men flattened to the ground and rolled to face Ella. They peeked cautiously above the grass, aiming their rifles in her direction. She ducked behind the hickory tree and pressed her body tightly against its rough bark.