General John Daniel Imboden

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Big Stone Gap, Va.

Few people are as of great an importance to the history of far Southwest Virginia as John D. Imboden. He and a few others transformed that region from the poverty stricken isolation of the post Civil War period into the modern industrial age.

John Daniel Imboden was born on his family plantation near Staunton, Virginia on Feb. 16, 1823, the son of George William and Isabella Wunderlich Imboden. He attended Washington College, now called Washington and Lee, and after graduation taught school while he read law. After passing the bar, he opened a law office in Staunton, and used this as a base for his election twice to the General Assembly.

After the bombardment of Fort Sumter President Lincoln called for volunteers to put down the rebellion of the southern states. Virginia called a secession convention instead, and Imboden was elected as a delegate to it, and voted for secession. He returned to Staunton where he used his prestige to raise the volunteer Staunton Artillery, and became its Captain. Together they fought at First Manassas, where he supported General Bee, who gave Stonewall Jackson his nickname during this battle. Later he captured the U. S. Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, and again demonstrated his recruiting abilities by raising the Partisan Rangers, which became the 62nd Virginia Mounted Infantry, and with which he fought at Cross Keys, New Market, and at Port Republic under Stonewall Jackson. He was on Early's Washington campaign.

In January 1863 he became a Brigadier General and lead a raid into West Virginia where he cut the B & O Railroad, and confiscated the thousands of cattle and horses from local farmers which enabled Lee to take his Army of Northern Virginia into the Gettysburg Campaign. During Lee's advance into Pennsylvania, he covered the left flank of the Army of Northern Virginia.

During the Battle of Gettysburg, Imboden guarded the Confederate baggage train, which consisted, in part, of the commissary-on-the-hoof that he had captured in West Virginia. Due to this circumstance, his was the only Confederate unit that did not participate in that desperate struggle, and because of this fact it was the only one intact enough to act as the Confederate rear guard.

Similarly, the Federal unit which had guarded the Union's baggage train

was the only unit in that army that had not been shot up, and it was the only one capable of pursuing Lee's retreating army. Imboden's retreating rear guard contained the Confederate wounded, bouncing along in wagons on the rutted roads, along with all of the Confederate ammunition. When the Federal unit caught up with Imboden, the Union commander sent a feinting attack to one side of Imboden's troops, hoping to get Imboden to commit the bulk of his rear guard to that side of his wagon train. However, Imboden correctly read the Union commander's tactics, and placed the bulk of his troops on the other side of his retreating column, where he was able to repel the main Federal attack. Imboden thus saved the Army of Northern Virginia, and allowed it to finish its retreat into Virginia, a circumstance that allowed the war to continue for another two years.

Following this historic action, he captured Charlestown, West Virginia, for which he received a written commendation from Robert E. Lee. On the army's return to Virginia he was placed in command of the Shenandoah Valley District.

In May 1864 he was one of the two Confederate commanders at the Battle of Piedmont, at which the South lost the Shenandoah Valley for the final time. The Confederate troops who fought this battle were mostly from Southwest Virginia. Imboden had been the commanding officer at the beginning of the battle, and the Southern troops were in process of driving the Yankees from the field, when up road came Confederate General W. E. "Grumble" Jones, himself born and raised in Washington County, Virginia, and an Emory and Henry graduate. A heated argument developed between Imboden and Jones, over which one of them was the senior commander. Jones won the argument, and he emphatically ordered Imboden to sit on his horse where he was, and to move under no circumstances, until Jones personally came and told him that he could move. Jones then trotted off to assume command to the Confederate forces, and as soon as he was out sight of Imboden, he was shot and killed. The Union forces made some tactical changes, and while Imboden sat on his horse atop a hill watching the battle unfold, there was no one in charge of the Confederate forces to order counter measures. As a result the South lost the battle, and with it the Shenandoah, the Confederate bread basket.

After that battle Imboden lead the delaying actions against the pursuing Union General Hunter as he torched the Valley of Virginia, a campaign that included the burning of VMI. Imboden was unjustifiably criticized for his actions at Piedmont. Later in 1864 he caught typhoid fever and as an invalid spent the rest of the war on prison duty at Aiken, South Carolina.

An interesting portrait of Imboden during the War is given in the following reminiscence of an elderly Bedford County woman recorded in her old age. "I remember when General Imboden came riding up on a dapple gray horse. He jumped the picket fence and never before had I ever seen such a fine looking man, with his epaulets on his shoulders. I wondered why Pa didn't wear a suit like that. He was following up the Yankees. He asked Ma if she had anything to eat. She told him no, but she would fix something right quick. So she gave him and his company the best she had. She told him that she would have to give him cornbread as there was not a dust of flour in the house. Pa had the meat hid and the horses taken to the mountain. The Yankees passed along before General Imboden came and ate up every egg we had on the place, but they didn't do any damage. Pa was mighty willing to let them have anything we had to eat. We had an old well that had gone dry. It was lined with rocks, so Pa put all the meat in there and the Yankees didn't get a single piece of it."

After the war Imboden settled into the practice of law in Richmond, but the War had caused Imboden's financial ruin, and he spent the rest of his life obsessed with regaining it. He expressed his attitudes on this subject in a letter to Major G. Marshall McCue after the War, "I don't care a damn about the truth or falsehood of history so far as that was was concerned -- I know that it ruined me financially -- and nobody thanks me for my efforts in a common cause then, and never will unless I get rich."

In 1871 he attended a symposium on possible means of economic development in Virginia sponsored by the Richmond Chamber of Commerce. At it he heard State Senator Col. Auburn Pridemore of Jonesville lecture on the coal and iron fields of Wise and Lee Counties, and the possible railroad routes into the area, with the potential development all converging at Big Stone Gap. Taking Pridemore's material, in 1872 Imboden published a treatise entitled "Coal and Iron Resources in Virginia", which he used as promotional material in his attempts to recruit northern capitalists to underwrite the development of Wise and surrounding counties.

His first significant partnership in trying to build an economic empire in Wise and the surrounding counties was with Rufus Ayers, former Attorney General of Virginia, who had come to share Auburn Pridemore's vision of the future of this region. They formed a company to build a narrow gauge railroad from the Norfolk and Western tracks at Bristol to the coal and iron fields around Big Stone Gap, Va. The name of the company was "the Bristol Coal and Iron Narrow Gauge Railroad".

The going was slow at first, but by the winter of 1879-80 they had ten

miles of right-of-way prepared to the northwest of Bristol. The costs of further construction, especially the required bridge across the North Fork of the Holston River, were beyond the means of these men. Imboden moved to Pittsburgh where he attempted to raise capital for the Southwest Virginia projects from among northern capitalists who had made their fortunes supplying the Union war effort in the railroad, iron and anthracite industries of Pennsylvania. Among them were C. S. O. Tinstman, E. K. Hyndman, A. O. Tinstman, the Wentz brothers. These investors, believing that the railroad was actually nearing completion, advanced Imboden $500 to travel to Southwest Virginia to see if he could tie up coal and iron land on their behalf. He made the trip to Bristol on the railroad system, but came to Big Stone Gap in a hack.

Together Imboden, Ayers, and the northern capitalists formed the Tinsalia Coal and Iron Co. which became the Virginia Coal and Iron Co., which later changed its name to the Penn-Virginia Corp., and which today is the major land and natural resource owner in Wise and Lee Counties. Within months he had bought 147,000 acres at a fraction of its value, much of it from the related Kane and Olinger Families.

The methodology of the Olinger transaction is illustrative. John C. Olinger owned 42,000 acres extending from the current village of Olinger on the Powell River, across Stone Mountain to the Keokee area, and on to Holmes Mill in Kentucky. This land has been continuously mined for the last one hundred years, and still holds valuable coal reserves. Olinger, probably on the advice of his influential neighbor, C. Bascom Slemp, retained Slemp's friend and ally Rufus Ayers to represent him in the sale of his valuable land. Ayers on behalf of Olinger sold the land to Imboden, who was acting as agent for the Tinsalia Corp, for thirty five cents an acre. Ayers, of course, was a major stock holder in the Tinsalia Corporation. The Olinger family to this day consider their land to have been stolen.

The assets of the Bristol Coal and Iron Narrow Gauge Railroad were taken over by the Tinsalia Corporation. Imboden, as land agent and attorney for the Tinsalia Corp, and as general manager of railroad construction, threw himself into the building of the railroad, now renamed the South Atlantic and Ohio Railroad, which was to run from Bristol to Appalachia. The purpose of the railroad was to open to markets the coal mined from the Tinsalia Corp. properties.

This was the high point in Imboden's career in Wise County. He and his son Frank owned a one sixth interest in 100,000 acres in Southwest Virginia timber, iron, and coal lands owned by the Tinsalia corporation, and was under contract with that corporation to receive one fifth of the profits made from the Kane-Olinger tract. The newly planned company

town to be built at the Big Stone Gap in Stone Mountain was almost called the Town of Imboden. The first seam of coal mined by this corporation was named in his honor.

Yet by the late 1880 affairs between Imboden and his partners began to turn sour. The investors in the Tinsalia Corporation divided along aggressive and conservative lines, with Hyndman and Imboden wanting to extend the South and Atlantic Railroad east to the Carolinas and west to the Ohio Valley. The Tinstmans, General Ayers, Col. Bullett, and Wentzes wanted to concentrate their efforts in the core of their new domain in Wise County.

In Oct. 1881 Imboden wrote that he could not understand Tinstman's hostility toward him, and said that he believed that Tinstman was trying to drive him out of the company. Later that year he was maneuvered out of the Tinsalia Company, and Rufus Ayers supervised the completion of the railroad, and the further development of the coal and iron industry around Big Stone Gap. The relationship between Ayers and Imboden had been symbiotic, but the process had made Rufus Ayers a very wealthy man.

Imboden took his share of the Tinslia Corporation out and formed his own corporation in the heart of the domain of the Olinger tract. His Imboden Coal and Coke company owned 9500 acres on Pigeon Creek in Wise County, Crab Orchard in Lee County, and the head of Clover Fork in Harlan Co. Kentucky, now containing the coal towns of Imboden, Exeter, Keokee, and Holmes Mill. This corporation was rolled over into the Keokee and Consolidated Coke Co in 1906, and was bought out in 1910 by the Virginia Coal and Iron Company, the successor to the other portion of the Tinsalia Corporation. Pursuing his interest in the Carolina to Ohio railroad Imboden moved back to Bristol to develop the Carolina portion of this dream.

During the period of time that he was active in Big Stone Gap, Imboden built and lived part time in a fine home on Imboden Hill, but maintained his main residence in Bristol. Upon leaving the Gap, he sold the house to the iron master at the Ayers iron furnace in the Gap. Imboden had a condescending love for the Gap, and wrote of his enjoyment of corn shuckings, log rollings, quilting frolics in the Gap, and of his delight of "mingling with such primitive people."

Imboden foresaw an economic empire on the head waters of the South Fork of the Holston River which extends along the Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia border in the vicinity of Mount Rogers. Virgin forests, iron ore, and manganese were to be had in this wonderful country. He envisioned a railroad to traverse the area all the way to Boone, North Carolina, which would not only serve the local commercial needs, but

would connect North Carolina with the Ohio River via a connection made with the Norfolk and Western Railroad at Abingdon, Va. The enterprise needed a town, and he laid out the new community of Damascus, Virginia, naming it after Damascus Syria, which is historically famed as a commercial center for Damascus steel and for timber from the Cedars of Lebanon. To perform these tasks he founded the Damascus Enterprise Company and the Abingdon Coal and Iron Railroad Company.

Imboden laid out the street grid of his new town. He started construction on a hotel, and his fifth wife built the Episcopal Church, where she taught Sunday School. Plans for narrow gauge railroads which were to cover the countryside to saw mills and to mines and which were to converge at Damascus were made. Then a panic hit in 1893, and the company failed and work on the railroad and town stopped.

It was not to be. Imboden died suddenly of intestinal problems on August 15, 1895 while in Damascus, and was first buried there in the Episcopal Cemetery, but was later moved to Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, the final resting place of many famous Confederates.

The railroad was sold in 1900 to the Virginia and Carolina Railroad. Others reaped the wealth that Imboden had anticipated.

His life had been marked by obsessive drive, tragic near greatness, bitterness over his rough handling by fate, and finally by obscurity. Not withstanding his commitment to remaking his fortune, he had found time to serve as Commissioner to the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 and to the Columbia Exposition of 1893. He was a prolific writer on the Civil War.

He married five times, to Eliza McCue, Mary Wilson McPhail, Edna Porter, Anna Lockett, and Florence Crockett. Five children survived him.

Interestingly enough, the "Big Stone Gap Post" did not even carry a notice or obituary of the passing of this man who, along with Rufus Ayers, created the modern Appalachia - Big Stone Gap area. Nothing else demonstrates better the bitterness of the Imboden - Ayers breakup, and of Ayer's triumphant domination of Big Stone Gap.

There are three things that bear his name in Wise County today, standing as they do as testimony of his passing importance. They are Imboden Hill in Big Stone Gap, the community of Imboden, and the Imboden seam of coal. In this naming contest, he surpassed his old rival, Rufus Ayers, who has only a small church, Ayer's Chapel in Big Stone Gap, named after him.

Imboden's railroad became affectionately known as the Virginia Creeper, and a century later its roadbed became a favorite hiking and bike trail for people of the area, who scarcely recognize the name of General John Daniel Imboden.

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communication from Dr. Olinger to the author