The Great Whisky Rebellion: Rebels With A Cause
by Helene Smith

Smith has written books on a number of subjects, including A Guidebook to Historic Western Pennsylvania with George Swetnam. For those just vaguely familiar with the Whiskey Rebellion, this book is a good starting place. Most Western Pennsylvania farmers found their grain too heavy to haul across the Alleghenies; distilled grain was much lighter, brought ten times the profit, and was used locally for barter. The rebellion was a reaction to the government's new tax on whiskey; distillers resented the intrusion by a government they had just fought for. As Smith tells us, "Farmers wanted to know why they had to pay excise for drinking their grain, a cash crop, which they did not have to pay when eating it." The government reacted by sending its army to quell the uprising.

More like an "everything you wanted to know" than a straight retelling, Smith's self-described anthology offers chapters on locations of sites and memorabilia holdings, distilleries, churches and cemeteries, prominent men and their homes, plus a number 19th and early 20th century historical accounts. It's always reported that Washington was the only president to ever ride with his troops (though he only went as far as Bedford), and Smith lists some of the army's encampment sites. Perhaps most useful is a chronology which lays out the causes and events. Smith notes that the diverse accounts present many discrepancies in dates, numbers, and spellings. (Even whisky, she notes, has "several spellings throughout this work."). Drawbacks include a lack of page numbers for the table of contents and an overall sense that the text is wedged in too tightly. Otherwise, this is a thorough introduction to the subject. — Brian Butko

Soldier Boy: The Civil War Letters of Charles O. Musser, 29th Iowa
Edited by Barry Popchock

We're always looking for Civil War diaries that go beyond the typical marching, illness, and weather descriptions. This one succeeds because Musser wrote about so much more: camp life, battles, patriotism, even Lincoln's assassination. He enlisted in the Union Army in 1862 at age 20, and his brother enlisted a month afterwards — but in the Confederate Army. By war's end, Charles Musser had seen a lifetime of experiences in less than three years. His insights, often lacking in Civil War correspondence, become ours.

From Columbus, Ky. - January, 1863: "I have resigned my situation as cook in our mess to a contraband [an escaped or liberated slave]. the Camps are over run with the darkies... they work very cheap."

From Devalls' Bluff, Ark. - August, 1863: "when we Stop at a plantation, the poultry, pigs, and beef has to Suffer... the bayonet is more used for such purpose than any other."

From Little Rock, Ark. - February, 1864: Musser writes of his revulsion that his sister may marry a "cowardly copperhead," [a Southern sympathizer in the North] and that he "would rather a sister of mine would marry one of them reclaimed rebels than a renegade Tory."

From Little Rock, Ark. - March, 1864: "There is a heap of forms and ceremonies to be performed in the army that looks like foolishness."

From Fort Stoddard, Ala. - May, 1865: "the Prisoners... swear that they will not take up arms against their country — what ever their officers say to the contrary. They all feel sorry that President Lincoln was murdered. they say that he was more of a friend to them than the Villain [Jefferson] Davis was. ah, the whole south will curse the day that diabolical murder was committed. that will cause more bloodshed than a hardfought Battle."

From Island Brazos De Santiago, Texas - June, 1865: "we could not see the use in sending us away off here to this desolate sand bank when there was no longer an enemy to fight... I long for the time when I can say that I am a free man and not bound down by military law... I do not feel like the same person that I was a year ago..." — Brian Butko