

Border Retaliation

What proves baffling, brings astonishment and sometimes outright denial by Civil War buffs is that the Civil War actually started along the Missouri-Kansas border in 1854 shortly after the signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act by the U. S. Congress. As territories were opened for statehood with slavery included Congress permitted two states to gain statehood at a time, one to be a free-state and the other pro-slavery in order to maintain the balance of power between the two groups in Congress. Nebraska Territory was pre-acknowledge to be admitted as a free state but much to the chagrin of the Southern population Northern radical abolitionists swarmed into the Kansas Territory with the intention of voting it into the Union as a free state even if it meant armed rebellion.

Egged on by wealthy abolitionist supporters like Eli Thayer and Amos Lawrence, who provided the radicals with arms and funding the new Kansas Territory was soon swarming with an unscrupulous illegal rabble. Chief among this criminal element were the likes of James Lane, John Brown, Charles Jennison, James Montgomery and lesser well-known cohorts.

As Kansas was settled early by both pro-slavery and free-state settlers animosities soon developed. The radical abolitionists formed armed gangs and began to run the pro-slavery element out of the territory. The repercussions from the actions of one such gang headed by the notorious James Lane was felt years later once war was officially declared.

One pro-Southern family lived in what was called the Metropolitan area of Kansas, which comprised counties on both sides of the Missouri-Kansas border where Jackson, Bates, Cass and Vernon counties adjoined and became the epicenter of the Border Wars. Located in the Metropolitan area was McCamish Township. The center of activity was the McCamish Hotel located on Bull Creek near Edgerton in Johnson County run by George Washington Wells, who settled in the area in 1843.

During one of James Lane's raids on pro-Southern settlements he looted and burned down the McCamish Hotel. As a result George W. Wells fled to Missouri with his wife and six children establishing a 200 acre farm in the Brooking Township ten miles south of Independence. But the brutal acts of these pre-war raids and atrocities committed on peaceful communities and individuals by James Lane and his gang resulted in a retaliation that reverberated years afterwards when it took the form of armed defense once the war officially started.

And not only did it affect George Washington Well's family alone. The sympathy and support from his family and neighbors weighed along with him in total agreement. Thus, when the war started Well's family which included their nephews and cousins; George, James and Oliver Shepherd; Isaac, James, John, Martin and Thomas Flanery, all joined Colonel William Clarke Quantrill in his fight defending Missouri against the ravage attacks of the Kansas Jayhawkers. Well's new neighbors suffered at the hands of early Jayhawker raids as well and they also joined Quantrill's company. There were men like Jabez McCorkle, Thomas Harris, Randolph Venable, and Cole and Jim Younger.

On August 18, 1862 Jayhawkers invaded Missouri joining forces with Union militia that encountered Quantrill encamped with Confederate Colonel Upton Hayes along the banks of White Oak Creek in southern Jackson County near the home of George W. Wells. As the battle swayed in favor of Quantrill's forces Wells climbed a rock outcropping and cheered for the Southern forces, In their anger the Jayhawkers turned their fire on Wells killing him instantly. He was forty-five years old but had a son, Charles Edwin, who would soon avenge his father. As the Jayhawkers retreated they burned down

Well's home and drove off all his cattle. Well's wife was soon forced to sell the property in order to survive.

It was sometime before the battle that their neighbor, Dr. Pleasant Lea visited the Wells home to get a newspaper. There he was accosted by Jayhawkers who wound up torturing him in their demands to find out about Quantrill's company. In their persuasion to gain information they tied Dr. Lea to a tree breaking his arms in order to get him to talk. Being frustrated in their attempt they finally bayoneted him to death. His sons Joseph and Frank wound up joining Quantrill.

After the Kansas Jayhawker's orgy of murder and rapine retaliation was sure in coming. And it came on the swift thoroughbred horses that were ridden by the most skillful light cavalry organization that the world had ever known; Quantrill's guerrillas. Every Kansas citizen knew a day of reckoning would be coming. Kansas governor Charles Robinson was quoted as saying, "If our towns and settlements are laid waste by fire and sword, we will have General Lane to thank for it." On August 20, Quantrill led the largest guerrilla force known to history into Lawrence, Kansas and onto the headquarters of the Kansas Jayhawkers and home to James Lane. Quantrill was joined by Charles Edwin Wells, the 16-year-old son of George Washington Wells. Following the raid Charles was responsible for leading Quantrill's forces back into the safety of the Blue Hills of Missouri. Joining Charles was Thomas Harris whose own home had been sacked by Kansas Jayhawkers and their mother and sisters abused. Well's cousins, the Flanerys, also suffered at the hand of the rapacious Jayhawkers. On October 29, 1861 Martin Flanery's home was burned down and all his possessions stolen. He recounted seeing 25 Southern homes burning the same day. Zion Flanery, father to the Flanery brothers, was shot down and murdered by Jayhawkers while he was gathering in his crops. His relative, John Hagan was murdered by Federal soldiers while riding in a wagon returning from church with his wife and children.

Many of Wells' neighbors and relatives rode along on the Lawrence raid. Clark and Henry Hockingsmith were there as well as Robert Clayton, Samuel Constable, William Freeman, George, Dick and William Maddox, and John McCorkle. Riley Crawford, George Wigginton, William Gaugh, James Lilly, Theodore Cassell, John House, William Hulse, and William Noland were also there.

While the political and economic impetus that led up to the opening shot fired at Fort Sumter on April 14, 1861, it was the early atrocities and brutalities of Jayhawker James Lane and his followers as early as 1858 that swayed opinions and feelings against the undemocratic ideals of the Northern abolitionists. As their anti-slavery goals hurled the nation into a bloody protracted civil war they cheered its success. Lane led his marauders into Missouri bent on plundering innocent people who were being daily robbed and killed by hiding their criminal deeds behind the cloak of a flag that they used for their own selfish greed and ambitions. To those who questioned his looting, Lane proudly responded: "When you march through a state you must destroy the property of the men in arms against the Government; destroy, devastate, desolate. This is war. Ours is an army of volunteers who must not be judged by the rules applied to regulars." The actions of James Lane and the likes of John Brown once lauded by simple-minded radicals are today as much reviled as those of Hitler or Stalin.

Article by Paul R. Petersen – Author of *Quantrill of Missouri, Quantrill in Texas, Quantrill at Lawrence and Lost Souls of the Lost Township*.

