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American Civil War an Official History: The Kansas "Red Legs" as Missouri's Dark Underbelly

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The Kansas-Missouri Border 1861-1862: Guerrilla Warfare

The passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was the beginning of constant political debates about the status of a number of new states of the Union, to be split into Proslavery or Free states as demanded by Congress. Slowly the arguments shifted into armed conflict before the Civil War, and became a guerrilla war in Missouri in 1861.

In February 1861, Missouri had decided to remain in the Union, but Governor Jackson wanted to join the Confederacy (CSA), creating a split military, part Pro-Union, the rest pro-Confederate Missouri State Guard, now driven into the Southern part of the state. A number of fights between

regular units and pro-Southern ones in 1861/62 ended with the defeat of Confederate forces in parts of Missouri.

The subject of terrorism - the use of extremely violent measures by adversarial groups or armies on the world stage against their more powerful enemies - dominates military-political discussions today, but in past struggles, dominant powers have often used terrorism themselves. One such conflict was the Union Army's struggle against guerrillas in the Trans-Mississippi West during the Civil War, especially in Missouri.

The problem of the border states was their status of being partially pro-Union and also pro-CSA or partially pro-slavery (Missouri, Kentucky and Mayland were slave-holding states but remained with the union). This necessitated abolitionists often living door to door with their pro-slavery opponents. Other disputed states like Nebraska maintained a neutral stance. This made the situation in 1861 exceedingly complex.

The Jayhawkers and "Red Legs"

In fact, there were a number of guerrilla gangs in West Virginia, Missouri, Kansas, and Kentucky, some siding with the Union, some with the Confederates. In this struggle, the Union Army secretly employed men in Kansas and Missouri known as "Red Legs" for this heinous work.

What made the Red Legs infamous were their atrocities and raids into Missouri. Some historian assumed that a number of such looting-gangs operated on their own simply disguised as Red Legs, secret members of the Union Army. Meanwhile, the South had its own guerrilla formations fighting armed pro-Northern groups in the Appalachians and Quantrill's so-called "Bushwhackers," - often designated as the First Missouri Irregulars or Fourth Missouri Partisans, probably the most famous Southern one.[1] "Bleeding Kansas was a term used to illustrate what happened there, but there was also a "Bleeding Missouri."

Besides Union officers Col. Charles Jennison and Capt. George Hoyt, the Red Legs included the notable James Butler Wild Bill Hickok, William Sloan Tuft (known as Captain Tough), Walt Sinclair, Theodore Bartles, Jack Henry, and Red Clark. Many of the Red Legs had catchy names, like criminals: "One-Eyed Blunt," "Sore-Eyed Dan," "Pony" Searl, "Yellow Tom" Cullinan, Sam "Pickles" Wright, and "Beauregard Jack" Bridges. Another up-and-coming

thug was William Frederick Cody, later called "Buffalo Bill." Cody was one of the youngest Red Legs at age sixteen. Cody said in his autobiography: "In the winter of 1862, I became one of the 'Red-Legged Scouts," and that his leader was the notorious Captain William Tough.

Many of the Red Legs were killers. "Sore-eyed" Dan once complained when Jennison shot an old man, saying: "By God, that's the first time I ever saw a dog killed that had no teeth." Little is known about most of the crimes the members of the Red Legs committed, because those Missourians who confronted them usually failed to live to tell the tale. Historian Stephen Z. Starr said: "The Red Legs were not the kind of military body that keeps records and makes reports … they stole, robbed, burned, and killed indiscriminately and not in Missouri alone." No official letters, casual letters, or documents survived written by them, describing their operations, through their deliberate intentions.

At this time, the young Missouri guerrillas led by William Clarke Quantrill were the principal defenders of Western Missourians against these Red Legs, the Union Army, and their local militias. That's because normal, war-aged men were back East or in the South fighting the Yankees there. Quantrill and his young men, taking their place locally, attacked pro-Northern communities, farmers, and Union troops.

To understand why such small-scale campaigns were possible and atrocities were accepted and mainly remained undetected – the whole small-war events in this region were barely documented. One has to understand that the affected region was outside the large tactical operations of the war that were fought entirely east of the Mississippi, leaving the west to renegades and their violations of common behavior of regular troops, and these were in many cases left unreported. Additionally, because of lack of tactical oversight and unclear command and control, mainly civilians and small businesses became the objects of robbing. The involved area was large, partially not populated, with no functioning governments or administrations. Missouri had a topography of large forests and hilly areas not easily accessible. Newspapers in the east rarely reported what went on there and the local newspapers with a tiny circulation rarely were distributed or read anywhere else.

Biased "Official History"?

Modern academic historians and Kansans don't talk much about the Red Legs at all. Look in the history books, in the indexes of books, and discover that they rarely mention these gangs at all. But especially after the early 1950s, Hollywood had (for political reasons) found these events interesting and a dozen films were made covering the events in these years, either siding with the Union, but more recently – under the premise of Political Correctness – began to be more balanced.[2]

The term "Kansas Red Legs" is rarely mentioned by Civil War historians. Some historians use it to refer to the "Jayhawkers," members of Jim Lane's Brigade, more specifically to Colonel Charles Jennison's Kansas Seventh Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. Others use it as an all-purpose, generic term to describe the enemies of Southern sympathizers in western Missouri.

In mid-1861, brigade commander General James Lane and his regimental commanders Cols. Charles Jennison and James Montgomery led a violent spree up the western border of Missouri. Lane invaded Osceola Missouri, burned it to the ground, robbed its bank, killed a number of its citizens, and looted the town and adjoining farms of everything valuable and transportable, including a large number of slaves. Bryce Benedict, a Kansas judge from Topeka, in 2009, wrote a book, *Jayhawkers: The Civil War Brigade of James Henry Lane* for the University of Oklahoma Press. In this book, Benedict denied that Lane's brigade destroyed Osceola. That's an example of the failed objectivity that we are seeing still about Civil War events, where obvious facts are either denied or left unmentioned.
Following the destruction of Osceola, Lane's regiments pushed north and destroyed Dayton, Columbus, Papinville, Morristown,Clinton, West Point, Harrisonville, and Butler,Missouri. Many historians only emphasize that Lawrence, Kansas, an abolitionist bastion, was burned during the Civil War. Destruction in Missouri has been brushed aside.

Why the Lawrence Raid?

Most of the Red Leg's loot stolen from Missourians was processed in Lawrence, Kansas, and there, at their headquarters in the Johnson House Hotel on the West side of Vermont St., a block west of Massachusetts Avenue, the main street of Lawrence, it was prepared for sale. Lawrence was

the hub of anti-CSA agitation and pro-Union forces. Guerrilla Lt. William Gregg in his memoir said that rough structures constructed of straw were erected by the Red Legs in a ravine west of Massachusetts Avenue, and stolen goods were piled high: Furniture, pianos, sideboards, dressers, anything valuable. This loot was sold at periodic auctions conducted in the town. Everyone in the town knew who took this loot and where it came from: Writer Lucian Carr, a Kansas abolitionist at that time, described the town of Lawrence as "a mere fence-house for stolen property" from Missouri, captured by Jayhawkers and Red Legs.

When many wives of pro Southern combatants were arrested and some imprisoned in a jail in Kansas City, Missouri, the building collapsed killing relatives of Quantrill's men, and this was – so goes the ordinary story – the reason why Quantrill attacked Lawrence, but some historians think that the decision to attack the town was made much earlier and Quantrill who had lived in Lawrence had an agent in the city who observed Union forces nearby. The raid covered more than 50 miles and Quantrill gathered his forces east of the Kansas state line and entered Kansas in the darkness. He attacked with approximately 400 men, and killed an estimated 183 civilians between 14 and 90 years of age.

The attack on Lawrence shocked the north and the South and the reaction was General Orders No. 11 that required the banishing of the population of three counties on the Missouri border, plus an additional number of villages. Regular Union Army troops later devastated the whole area by burning down villages, farms, and appropriating cattle, horses, etc., to prevent the supply of Confederate guerrilla forces.

Red Legs and the U.S. Army

But to properly discuss these para-military units – often described as uniformed thugs - we should identify them more exactly: Who these Red Legs were, why they operated, when they did so, and where, and who paid them and gave them the freedom to act. But at first, we need to know precisely who these desperadoes were, and what crimes they committed, because they were a specific group of armed, many of them named volunteers, killers who swarmed over the western counties of Missouri and

eastern counties of Kansas, fully backed by the Union Army and paid by them.

They acted officially as border guards fighting Confederate insurgents, but were in fact part-time guerrillas with a high percentage of men which we would today identify as terrorists or criminals but also elite fighters, who burned down villages, stole the money of Missourians, robbed their farms of equipment and livestock, stripped their homes of furniture, crockery, gold, jewelry, and often killed the ones who tried to stop them, in a number of cases even hanging or torturing them to learn where their money and valuables were hidden or were just killing them outright.

George W. Martin, secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, wrote in 1910, "the U.S. Army authorized the Red Legs to wear Union uniforms, and they received the salary of commissioned officers." Martin said, the men "were employed on the [U.S. Army] pay rolls at seven dollars each per day." Union officer Cyrus Leland Jr. noted that General Thomas Ewing, commander, District of Missouri, "always had several [Red Legs] in his employ." Thomas J. Anderson of Topeka, Kansas, said the Red Legs were "a badge of desperate, service in the Union Army, furnished from "headquarters" and were above the average man in ability . . . and were recognized as fully as any captain, colonel, or general."

In the spring of 1862, after Lane's rampage up the Missouri-Kansas border, General Henry W. Halleck, commander of the Department of the Border, complained to Abraham Lincoln about Lane's deadly conduct in Missouri. The president answered him: "I'm sorry that General Halleck is so unfavorably impressed with General Lane." While Lincoln defended his friend Lane, he had Jenison's regiment reassigned to Humboldt, Kansas, to isolate it from further destructive actions in Missouri, and to avoid more violent mischief by Lane's plunderers and barn burners that would further arouse the people in Western Missouri.

Now banished from action, Jennison agitated for his promotion to brigadier general and even suggested that if he were not promoted, he would form his own "independent force." Upon hearing of this plan, which smacked of mutiny, General Samuel D. Sturgis, on April 17, 1862, had Jennison and his second in command, George Hoyt, arrested and placed in chains by Lt. John

E. Martin and eleven soldiers. Martin took Jennison and Hoyt in leg irons to the Fifth Street Military Prison in St. Louis and placed them under the custody of B. G. Farrar, the jail's provost marshal. Farrar, apparently familiar with Jennison, warned Jennison's guards, "If not well guarded, he will escape and return to his country, where he knows every lane and bush, and all the troops in the State will be unable to recapture him." Powerful abolitionists favoring Jennison, however, secured his release.

George Hoyt, Jennison's second in command, was cleared also of charges and returned to his role as commander of Company K of the "Jayhawkers," now part of the Kansas Fifteenth Volunteer Cavalry, fighting in Corinth, Mississippi, by May 18, 1862. The Fifteenth was now commanded by Colonel Dan Anthony, also a former Jayhawker. Jennison spent this time in Squiresville, Kansas, but was later on waging war on his own again.

By July 14, 1862, George Hoyt was charged for stealing during his operations in the South, actions like those he had conducted earlier in Missouri, and he was forced to resign his commission and to return to Kansas. There, he and Jennison *secretly* organized the "Red Legs," a multi-mission outfit that resembled a modern Special Forces unit. Its official main objective was to protect the border, but in fact it was stealing horses, cattle, livestock, money, jewelry, valuable personal belongings and agricultural products from Western Missouri's farmers. In addition, the Red Legs were assigned to burn Missouri homes, barns, and crops, intimidate and disorient the people in general, and assassinate wealthy, elite Missourians, because they were considered as pro-CSA and largely were.

George Hoyt was appointed by Jennison to be the Red Leg's field commander. Hoyt had earlier been John Brown's lead attorney at his trial for treason in Virginia after his attack on Harpers Ferry's arsenal in 1858, and he was even involved in a seldom discussed plot to free John Brown out of prison, certainly an act of treason.

The Red Legs ordinarily wore a blue Union military tunic and trousers extending to their knees. George Hoyt, their field leader, dressed more casually and flashily. He was described once in Paola, Kansas, as "dressed in a suit of black velvet, red sheepskin leggings, a red silk handkerchief carelessly thrown around his neck, and [wearing] a military hat with a

flowing black plume. At his waist was an embossed morocco belt carrying a pair of ivory mounted revolvers."

George Caleb Bingham, the famous Missouri painter and Union officer, had in his famous painting, "Orders No. 11" portrayed the banishment of Western Missouri farmers from four border counties and showed a scenery with a Red Leg in Union tunic, wearing the typical Red Leggings, intimidating an old gentleman after murdering his evidently unarmed son. Two other men wearing plumed hats, an exclusive Red Leg practice, are shown in the same scene. A fourth Red Leg, wearing also red leggings, loads loot on a wagon behind the third-mentioned Red Leg. A fifth Red Leg, more casually dressed, a white shirt open loosely at the neck, appears at the left of the painting riding a blooded horse and carrying on his lap the plantation owner's wife's traditional basket of valuables where she hid her keys, jewelry, and money. This Red Leg thief is also wearing red leggings, looking like George Hoyt, the stylish field leader of the Red Legs. Brig. Gen. Thomas Ewing is shown on horseback at the middle left of Bingham's famous painting, demonstrating his connection with the Red Legs. Despite Bingham's famous painting, Yankee-favoring historians, have never mentioned this picture and these identifiable individuals.

Demonstrating how difficult it is to penetrate the misinformation surrounding many of the events and circumstances of the Border War, Union General Blunt commander of the District of Kansas proclaimed the following to one of his commanders in a communiqué concerning the Red Legs:

"All operations against rebels must be directed by the legal military authorities. This injunction is to apply especially to an organization known as the "Red Legs," which is an organized band of thieves and violators of law and good order. All such persons found prowling over the country, without a legitimate purpose, must be disarmed; and if they shall be caught in the act of thieving or other lawlessness, or in the possession of stolen property, for which they cannot give a good and sufficient reason, they shall be shot upon the spot. And as there is reason to believe that officers in the military service are implicated directly or indirectly in the offenses committed by Red Legs and other lawless bands, therefore, upon the evidence that any officer who has failed or neglected to carry out the foregoing instructions in

reference to such Red Leg offenders, they will be dishonorably dismissed from the service of the United States Army."

Thomas J. Anderson of Topeka, a former member of Blunt's staff, however, tells us: "Blunt had many [Red Legs] on his staff," and also "had many of them on the pay roll." Blunt's admonition for his men to arrest Red Legs was just a cover up, a cynical ruse, sent up the chain of command to commanding generals at higher headquarters to deceive them about Blunt's own and close connection with these rogues. In this message, General Blunt disavowed any affiliation with the Red Legs. We know, nonetheless, with absolute certainty, that one of the leaders of the Red Legs was the infamous "Captain Tough" (W. S. Tough)—Blunt's own chief of scouts. In a famous photograph of Tough, he is shown wearing Red Leggings. This memo to headquarters by Blunt was rubbish.

How tough were the Red Legs? A fellow soldier named Bill Gardner, an aggressive fellow, had a difficulty with Captain Tough. One day, Tough was grooming his horse after a scout and had taken off his revolvers and placed them on a peg. Tough's brother, Lyttleton Tough, was working next to him. About this time, the contentious Gardner rode up to the two men with a drawn revolver and yelled: "Look out Tough!" Tough, without replying, grabbed his brother's pistol from its holster, whirled around, and shot Gardner "dead," his own Union comrade. Tough's associates said he was: "Tough in name and action."

Unionist newspaperman C. M. Chase of the *True Republican and Sentinel,* Sycamore, Illinois reported: "Tough lived in the woods, plundered from armed rebels, burned their houses, and killed the fighting population [of Missouri] without scruple . . . By many, Tuft [Tough] is regarded as a pure horse-thief and murderer; others of a rabid, lawless nature, incline to wink at his crimes as long as his avowed purpose [was] to rob and murder rebels."

Will, later called Buffalo Bill Cody, worked for Captain Tough, a pursuit that was his baptismal of fire into a life of violence, and it prepared him well for his later life as a scout in the U.S. Army in the dangerous Indian Wars, where cunning, marksmanship, stealth, skilled horsemanship, and quick responses were imperative. Like all Red Legs, Cody never elaborated any of

the details of his activities as a Red Leg, even to his sisters, though they knew he was a "red legged scout" and traveled with "the Red Legs." But even so, he admitted later that as one of the Red Legs he raided Missouri farms and settlements, adding: "Few of us ever returned empty-handed . . . We were the biggest gang of thieves on record." "Willie" (as his sister referred to him), after he joined the "Red Legged Scouts," told his sister upon returning from his duties that he had been quote "out with his Scouting Company on a Scouting Tour." Like a good Red Leg, he provided no details.

Clearly, an understanding of Cody's later adventures as a U.S. Army Scout and Indian fighter par excellence are incomplete without considering the full, seminal effect and influences these early experiences as a Red Leg had on the young, teenaged Cody. The Red Legs molded him into a fearless, cold-blooded fighting machine, a killer for the U.S. Army in the Indian Wars. He once scalped an Indian chief, Yellow Hair, and used his scalp as a trophy for over twenty years in his later stage acts and Wild West Shows.

By mid-1862, General Jim Lane was installed in the United States Senate, George Henry Hoyt, had been removed from the U.S. Army for stealing in the South, and Jennison after being removed from prison in St. Louis had plenty of time on his hands. At this time, a new marauding unit of some 30 to 100 men formed and began operations in western Missouri. Its secret, overall leader was Charles Rainsford Jennison, Missouri's old menace.

The unit's field commander, by summer's end, would be George Henry Hoyt, one of Jennison's former Seventh Kansas Cavalry commanders. The unit was referred to unofficially as the "Red Legs" or "Red Legged Scouts," a secret, unnumbered Union Army unit. When Jennison's ex-commander, Dan Anthony, became mayor of Leavenworth, the Red Legs used the town to dispose of stolen property. Jennison, meanwhile, used the horses his men stole in Missouri to operate a freighting business out of Leavenworth, Kansas, to Colorado with a stooge of his named Lossee, a Red Leg as well.

Albert Greene, a soldier in the Union Ninth Kansas Cavalry, said of the Red Legs: "The exigencies of the border warfare demanded the organization of a company of picked men, capable of independent action, who would act on an instant on their own initiative, without waiting for orders from superior authority and the cumbersome machinery of military etiquette."

Post War Careers

Three years after the Civil War ended—noting how interwoven the crooked and unlawful were with the sanctioned and legal in Kansas—George Hoyt, field leader of the Red Legs became the Attorney General of Kansas--Kansas chief law officer, a Red Leg, a thief, and murderer. And Jennison, the overall leader of the Red Legs, became a Kansas state Representative who ran a house of prostitution in Leavenworth. Dan Anthony became for many years mayor of Leavenworth, Kansas. And Kansas University's yearbook, even today, despite its mandatory "Political Correctness" policy, is titled: "The Jayhawker" and its famous sports teams are called, The Jayhawks."

What happened to Red Legs after the war? Captain Tough became a prominent operator in the stock yards in Kansas City, Missouri, and a famous horse breeder. He should have been; he learned his trade when stealing horses in Western Missouri. Many of these killers and thieves did very well for themselves.

But doubtless there were some embarrassing moments after the war for some of these men. But few Missourians later on knew who these Red Legs were, who these scoundrels were who had terrorized them, raided their farms, killed their fathers and brothers, insulted their sisters and mothers, and robbed their farms of money, jewelry, horses, cattle, and even chickens. But they knew what they looked like.

William Frederick Cody became a famous Army Scout, the winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, a famous stage actor, the founder of "Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show," perhaps America's greatest showman ever, and a self-made multi-millionaire.

A decade after the Civil War ended, he fell in love with a beautiful girl in St. Louis, Louisa Frederici. At 11 o'clock on March 6, 1866, at her home in St. Louis, a justice of the peace married the couple, and a trip to Leavenworth by steamboat followed, where they would settle temporarily. Cody described the trip in his autobiography:

"During the trip up the Missouri] river several very amusing, yet awkward incidents occurred, some of which I cannot resist relating. There happened to be on board the boat an excursion party from Lexington, Missouri, and those comprising it seemed to shun me, for some reason, which I could not

then account for. They would point at me, and quietly talk among themselves, and they eyed me very closely. After the boat had proceeded some little distance, I made the acquaintance of several families from Indiana en route to Kansas. A gentleman, who seemed to be the leader of these colonists, said to me, 'The people of this excursion party don't seem to have any great love for you.'"

"What does it mean?" Cody asked. "What are they saying? It's all a mystery to me."

His friend answered: "They say that you are one of the Kansas jay-hawkers and one of Jennison's house burners," replied the gentleman.

"I am from Kansas—that's true, Cody answered; and I was a soldier and a scout [not true at that time] in the Union army," he said; "and I was in Kansas during the border ruffian war of 1856 [that was when Cody was only ten years old]. Perhaps these people know who I am, Cody continued, and that explains their hard looks."

"That evening, Cody said, the Lexington, Missouri folks got up a dance, but neither the Indiana people nor I were invited to join them. My new-found friend thereupon came to me and said: 'Mr. Cody, let us have a dance of our own.'"

Two days later, west of Jefferson City, the captain of Cody's steamboat moored his ship long enough to allow the crew to cut wood for the boat's steam engine. A band of twenty horsemen who had been hidden nearby rode up to the ship. Cody describes the episode: ". . . as they came nearer the boat, they fired on the Negro deckhands, against whom they seemed to have a special grudge, and who were engaged in throwing wood on board. The Negroes all quickly jumped on the boat and pulled in the gangplank, and the captain had only just time to get the steamer out into the stream before the bushwhackers appeared."

'Where is that black abolition jay-hawker?' shouted the leader [an apparent reference to Cody]. "Show him to us, and we'll shoot him," yelled another. But as the boat had gotten well out in the river by this time, Cody said, they could not board us, and the captain, ordering a full head of steam, pulled out, and left them."

The target of the so-called "bushwhackers" was clearly Cody himself, and he was recognized by some of the Missourians on the boat, who had passed on his soon-to-be location to Cody's enemies when some passengers exited the boat earlier. During the attack, Cody's wife, Louisa, upon hearing the firing screamed and fainted. We are left to wonder what specific crimes Cody had participated in while a Red Leg in Missouri that prompted such a violent, vindictive attempt to kill him.

We can recognize how menacing these Red Legs were to ordinary Western Missourians and their guerrilla defenders. The Red Legs performed stealthy, secret, violent war crimes on Missourians for the Union generals in charge in Missouri and Kansas, Ewing and Blunt. They were ruthless, evil thugs sent abroad by wicked men to commit murders, robberies, and create mayhem. By war's end, monies in Missouri banks had been seized by the Union Armies; prominent landowners were made bankrupt and scattered to the winds from Montana to South America; and homes and farms in four Western counties were destroyed in what became known as the "Burnt District."

Kansas emerged from the Civil War as the state of cattle and wheat. The story of Missouri was similar, but the small farms and rural villages became the breeding ground of ongoing rebellions, which began already shortly after the Civil War, finally of gangs, which operated from Texas and Oklahoma to Kentucky and Ohio.

End of text

[1] Quantrills force of 400 to 450 irregulars is another band of CSA-friendly organization of dubious characters, many of whom later confessed to having been part of Quantrills "Bushwhackers," like Cole and James Younger, Jesse and Frank James, etc. Quantrill held a promotion as Captain of the CSA, but after the Lawrence Raid was forced to move south to Oklahoma and Texas in the winters; in late 1863 his force fell apart and parts operated in Texas.

Southern Missouri, Kentucky, etc. Qunatrill was killed in 1865 in a Union forces raid in Kentucky.

[2] There are a number of movies dealing with various aspects of the Kansas-Missouri small-war events and region, starting already in 1910, when Griffith made a pro-Southern *Ride with the Devil* movie. Most studios sympathized openly with the Union, like Columbia and Warner Brothers, but others did not. Additionally, there were pro-southern plots too. The Kansas-Missouri events between 1860 and 1965 were, more or less, authentically shown in a few movies like *Dark Command* (1940), *Kansas Raiders* (1950), *The Jayhawkers* (1959), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Ride With the Devil* (1999) or *American Outlaws* (2001); also in a number of Civil War TV documentaries.