

Finally, a Yankee Lie Revealed and a Legend Rebuffed

John W. Sheets is known mostly as an unfortunate and innocent victim of circumstance, allegedly shot by the outlaw Jesse James who mistook him for former Union leader Major Samuel P. Cox during the December 7, 1869 robbery of the Daviess County Savings Association in Gallatin, Missouri. But was John W. Sheets actually an innocent victim?

During the Civil War, Sheets became the Captain of Company D, First Cavalry Regiment in the Union's Missouri State Militia. Following the war he returned to civilian life and was employed by his former commanding officer, Colonel James McFerran, owner of the local Gallatin bank. Although Jesse James was never convicted of murdering Sheets nor of robbing the savings association, he was implicated because witnesses said he was sworn to avenge the death of Bill Anderson and along with Jim Anderson, Bill's brother, who was rumored to say he wanted to kill Major Cox for killing his brother during the war. From these rumors it was naturally assumed that Sheets was mistaken for Cox.

War time animosities had a hard time dying in Missouri. History shows that Jesse James was seriously wounded by Federal soldiers while trying to surrender at the end of the war. With Frank James following Colonel William Quantrill into Kentucky in the war's final days he was not at first permitted to return to Missouri. When Frank did finally return to his home in Clay County he was challenged by four former Union soldiers who started a provocation in order to murder him, which resulted in Frank killing two and seriously wounding the third while the fourth managed to shoot Frank in the hip causing a grievous wound. Friends carried Frank into hiding and summoned a doctor who saved his life.

Sometime later on February 18, 1867, five former Union militiamen rode to the James farm looking for Frank and Jesse. Only Jesse was at home in bed with a fever. His stepfather, Dr. Reuben Samuel, heard the soldiers on the front porch and inquired what they wanted. When they demanded he open the door, Dr. Samuel asked Jesse what he should do. Jesse saw that all the horses hitched to the fence had cavalry saddles. While a militiaman was hammering on the door with the butt of his pistol, Jesse placed his pistol up to the inside of the door and fired. The soldier on the other side fell back dead as Jesse threw open the door firing rapidly. A second soldier was killed as he tried to run, and two more were seriously wounded. The fifth soldier escaped into the darkness. From this moment on Jesse and Frank were forced to take to the bush as outlaws. This identical scene repeated itself many times to those who had belonged to Quantrill's guerrillas. On April 4, 1868, a gang of former Union soldiers surrounded the home of guerrilla Oliver Shepherd. When he came to the door he was shot twenty times, killing him in front of his wife and children.

The murder of Union Captain John W. Sheets has long been attributed to a case of mistaken identity but in fact it was the direct result of retaliation for the murder of Confederate Captain William T. Anderson by Sheets and his company. The two foes had had many skirmishes with each other throughout the war. On June 12, 1864 Anderson attacked fourteen men of Sheets' company where only two escaped. Anderson's raids north of the Missouri River were in retaliation for the atrocities being committed by the Missouri Militia who were robbing Southern citizens and killing old men. But the worst barbarities were directed at Anderson and his men. On September 12, 1864 Major Austin King of the 5th Missouri State Militia killed two of Anderson's men. One was 17 year old Al Carter. The Federals shot out his eyes then scalped him as well as his 17 year old companion Buck Collins. On

September 15, a Federal patrol surrounded five of Anderson's men. They shot them until their bodies were unrecognizable then scalped them.

The death of William Anderson on October 26, 1864 might have been accredited to simply a casualty of war except what occurred in the aftermath. Colonel James McFerran commanding the 1st Cavalry Regiment, Missouri State Militia, whose officers, Major Samuel Cox and Captain John W. Sheets with three hundred Federals were attacked by Anderson's men north of the Missouri River between Richmond and present day Orrick. Anderson charged in the lead with twenty guerrillas and was struck down in the initial volley. Not satisfied at vanquishing a fearless foe the soldiers rifled through Anderson's effects before deciding on their next course of action.

Relishing the sight of the dead guerrilla Captain Sheets under the direction of Major Cox ordered an army wagon to be brought up. A rope was tied around Anderson's neck and the body dragged through the dusty streets of Richmond until they could find a photography studio to take the dead guerrilla's picture. By now the soldiers had already cut off Anderson's finger to get to his wedding ring. A cousin of Anderson's living nearby begged to be able to clean the body and comb his hair before being photographed but was rebuffed. Following this Sheets had Anderson's body decapitated and his head mounted on a nearby telegraph pole as a warning to other guerrillas. Once the body was buried in a remote corner of the city cemetery local women brought flowers for the grave. Disgusted at this simple show of respect the soldiers then rode their horses roughshod over the grave while other soldiers repugnantly urinated over the spot.

When the war ended Colonel McFerran used his enrichments to open the Daviess County Savings Association in Gallatin, Missouri, employing his former Union officers Major Samuel P. Cox as manager and Captain John W. Sheets as cashier and hiring Private William A. McDowell also of Company D, 1st Cavalry Regiment as clerk. While Cox would occasionally be in the bank it was always Sheets who could be found at his place behind the cashier window.

It would be inconceivable to not believe that the men who entered the Daviess County Bank on December 7, had already reconnoitered the bank and easily knew the employees by their personal characteristics and past military service. Former unaccredited information that has been widely accepted as fact stated that Jesse James had been told that Cox was a cashier at the bank and had presumably confused Major Cox and Captain Sheets to be the same man. This would have been contrary to how the guerrillas obtained intelligence information about Union troop movements during the war. They knew that the owner and every employee of the bank was involved in the killing and butchery of Bill Anderson's body.

Before the robbery two men were seen riding their horses at a fast pace into town in order to arrive at noon when many townsfolk would have returned to their homes for lunch, resulting in many innocent people not being on the streets or present in the bank. Their prior intelligence of the town pointed out the best escape route. They tied their horses in the alley behind the bank where they would make their escape. When the two men entered the bank they found Sheets talking to bank clerk William A. McDowell. One of the robbers asked change for a large bill and followed Sheets into the vault where he was then shot. McDowell immediately bolted for the door as the other robber fired rapidly at him but missed. Fortunately Major Cox was away from the bank for a few minutes and avoided the same fate. In the years following what has transpired is an erroneous account by numerous authors and historians about a robbery and revenge killing that has turned into legend. And the legend lives on. Neither Major Cox nor Captain Sheets, or any of their men had any qualms or compunction about cutting off Bill Anderson's head and dragging his body through the streets and afterwards mounting his

head atop a telegraph pole nor did they object to their men riding their horses roughshod over Anderson's grave and urinating on it.

As a result, on December 7, 1869, there were no innocent men present in the Davies County Savings Association in Gallatin, Missouri.

Article by Paul R. Petersen - author of *Quantrill of Missouri*, *Quantrill in Texas* and *Quantrill at Lawrence*.