

THE BLOODIEST REBEL



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We like to think of the Civil War as the last romantic war - as a sort of gallant duel between gentlemen. There was a certain aura of "swords and roses" in the East, but west of the Mississippi, that neglected area of Civil War history, quite a different atmosphere prevailed. Here the fighting was grim, relentless, and utterly savage - a "battle to the knife, and the knife to the hilt."

Nowhere was this truer than in the bloody war-within-a-war that raged along the Kansas-Missouri border. There the people did not even wait for the bombardment of Fort Sumter. As early as 1855, armies of proslavery "border ruffians" from Missouri and antislavery Kansas "jayhawkers" clashed in the fierce struggle which determined that Kansas would enter the Union as a free rather than as a slave state.

This prelude to the Civil War engendered a mutual hatred and bitterness which, in 1861, flared into vicious reprisals and counter-reprisals. As one Kansan later remarked, "The Devil came to the border, liked it, and decided to stay awhile." Led by Tim Lane, Charles Jennison, and Dan Anthony, Kansan raiders swirled through western Missouri, looting, burning, and killing. Missouri "bushwhackers" in turn made quick, devastating guerrilla forays into Kansas. Soon, a border strip forty miles wide was a no man's land of desolate farmhouses, brush-grown fields, and prowling gangs of marauders.

One man rapidly came to dominate this border war: William Clarke Quantrill, chief of the Missouri bushwhackers. For dashing boldness and murderous ferocity, his raids into Kansas had no parallel. In March 1862, his men sacked the little village of Aubrey; at Olathe in October, they captured 125 Kansas militiamen and shot down helpless civilians "like so many hogs"; a month later, they reduced the entire town of Shawnee to ashes. Hundreds of terrified Kansans moved to the interior or fled the state entirely.

This "fiend," as the Kansans called him, was a tall, slender young man with wavy hair and a mild, almost effeminate face. Only his cold blue eyes, half concealed by thick, drooping lids, bespoke the ruthless killer. Born July 31, 1837, at Canal Dover, Ohio, he had spent most of his adult life in Kansas. As a boy, he is said to have delighted in nailing snakes to trees, torturing

dogs and cats, and stabbing cows and horses. He received a good education for his day - his father was a schoolteacher - and for a time followed his father's profession in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. In the spring of 1857, accompanied by two other men from Canal Dover, Quantrill migrated to Kansas, where he engaged in farming and also, apparently, got into trouble with his neighbors for stealing. In 1858, he joined an army expedition to Utah as a teamster, spent some time in the Pike's Peak gold fields, and then returned to Kansas, eventually settling in Lawrence.

There, for reasons unknown, he went by the name of Charley Hart (an alias he had occasionally used out west) or, sometimes, William Clarke. The townspeople found him somehow strange and suspicious and were inclined to shun him. Once, when out riding with a girl, he pointed to a tree and said that it would be a good place to hang a man. Ultimately he became a member of a gang of Kansas border bandits engaged in stealing blacks and horses from Missouri; he was arrested once but jumped bail and thereafter managed to evade arrest.

Quantrill's first real notoriety came in December 1860. He persuaded three Kansas "practical abolitionists" to accompany him on a raid into Missouri for the purpose of liberating the slaves of Morgan Walker, a well-to-do Jackson County farmer. But prior to the raid, he secretly forewarned Walker, with the result that the three abolitionists walked into a deadly trap. Quantrill remained in Jackson County the rest of the winter, regaining the sympathy and trust of the Missourians by telling them he had engineered the ambush to revenge the murder of an elder brother by Kansas jayhawkers. It was a lie, but to this day, many Missourians firmly believe it.

Following the outbreak of full-scale hostilities along the border, Quantrill joined one of the Missouri bushwhacker bands, then formed his own outfit. His spectacular forays gained him recognition as head of all the guerrillas, and in the summer of 1862, the Confederate Army granted him a captain's commission. Union authorities, however, regarded the bushwhackers as outlaws and treated them accordingly. In retaliation, the latter vowed to show no quarter to Federal prisoners.