

# **“A Most Cruel and Unjust War:” The Guerrilla Struggle along the Missouri-Kansas Border**

<http://www.civilwaronthewesternborder.org/essay/“-most-cruel-and-unjust-war”-guerrilla-struggle-along-missouri-kansas-border>

An essay by Jeremy Neely, Missouri State University

Bursheba Fristoe Younger knew better than perhaps anyone the thorough devastation wrought by nearly a decade of guerrilla warfare along the Missouri-Kansas border. The Youngers, like many households, traced their hardships back to the partisan violence of the 1850s. A slaveholding family of southern descent, they owned a dry goods store in Cass County, Missouri, which was repeatedly robbed by antislavery bands of Kansas “jayhawkers.” At the outbreak of the national Civil War, Bursheba’s husband, Henry, remained an avowed Union man, but in July 1862, Unionist militia ambushed, robbed, and murdered the family patriarch as he traveled home from Westport.

Her son, Cole—the seventh of 14 children—took to the brush as a pro-Confederate guerrilla and eventually joined up with William C. Quantrill, the country’s most notorious “bushwhacker.” That association soon brought upon the Youngers even greater scrutiny from Union troops, who in February 1863 ordered the family home set ablaze. Bursheba’s resulting exile took her north to Clay County, where she lingered, her family broken and wealth gone, until the war finally burned itself out.

The Civil War touched the lives of virtually everyone who lived near the Missouri-Kansas border. The war in this part of the West blurred and often shattered the distinctions between home front and battlefield. Fierce differences over slavery and its expansion triggered the irregular violence that erupted in Kansas Territory in 1856, but this bloodshed often devolved into a vengeful cycle of retaliation. Such fighting was often deeply personal in nature; long before the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, the border was consumed by a bitter civil war that pitted neighbor versus neighbor.

## **Political Conflict and Vengeance in Missouri**

James Montgomery captured the powerful ways that politics and vengeance transformed the factional struggle for Kansas into a conflict that gripped both sides of the state line. Proslavery gangs harassed and ejected most antislavery men from Linn County in 1855, but Montgomery clung to his claim, even after marauders destroyed the family’s cabin. As a wave of northern emigrants soon flooded the county, the Kentucky native emerged as the leader of a “Self Protective Association,” an outfit whose purpose was less defensive than its name suggested.

The triumph of the free-state movement calmed much of Kansas by 1858, but feuding continued to roil the southeastern counties. The plunder and theft carried out by Free-Soil bands came to be known as “jayhawking,” and as their campaign of intimidation drove many proslavery families back into Missouri, Montgomery seemed ready to unleash further terror upon slaveholders across the border.

Settlers in western Missouri braced themselves for violence. Anxieties grew in the winter of 1858-1859, when men under John Brown raided several Missouri farms, liberating nearly 20 slaves and killing one slaveholder. Over the next two years, citizens of Bates and Vernon counties repeatedly called upon Governor Robert Stewart for assistance, and in November 1860 he dispatched a brigade of state militia to the border. An attack by Montgomery’s men, however, did not materialize.

The secession crisis and the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter sharpened political divisions along the border. When the national Civil War broke out, most people in Kansas, which had finally been admitted as a free state, rallied behind the Union. Missouri, befitting its position as a border state, was bitterly divided in its loyalties. Most households, including the Youngers, hoped to preserve both the Union and slavery, but a substantial number identified with their native states of the South. The protracted struggle for Kansas had galvanized many Missourians, and in time the ranks of Confederate sympathizers grew, especially after emancipation and the Union army’s forceful policies alienated residents throughout the state.

The jayhawker invasion that finally came in September 1861 marked an even more destructive turn in the border war. Senator James Lane, having taken command of the volunteer brigade he had organized, dispatched Charles Jennison and his unit of “South Kansas Jay Hawkers” into the Osage Valley of western Missouri. The rest of the brigade, some 1,400 members strong, followed days later and raided Butler, Harrisonville, and other villages.

Determined to punish Missouri secessionists, Lane’s men plundered the farms of suspected rebels (and more than a few unoffending Unionists). On September 22, the Kansans sacked the town of Osceola, killing as many as a dozen Confederates and helping themselves to anything that might be of use to would-be rebels. Joseph Trego, like many comrades, rode home to Kansas on a horse seized from a Missouri farm. “It does me good,” he wrote his wife, “to use the luxuries of these fellows that have always been the enemies of Anti-slavery men.”

Union General Henry Halleck, commander of the Department of Missouri, condemned the jayhawkers’ wanton plunder and destruction. “The course pursued by those under Lane and Jennison has turned against us many thousands who were formerly Union men,” wrote Halleck. Federal troops gained control over Missouri by early 1862, but Lane’s raid threatened to undermine the army’s ability to maintain order in the state. That the raid was carried out by Union volunteers only deepened Missourians’ hostility toward the federal presence in their midst, which many came to regard as a menacing occupation.

## **The “Bushwhackers”**

Pro-Confederate guerrillas, derided by enemies as “bushwhackers,” exemplified this hostility. Usually in their late teens and twenties, many guerrillas, like Cole Younger, were the elder sons of Southern families. Some of these households owned slaves. By 1862, an increasing number of enslaved persons in Missouri seized upon the chaos sown by war to escape to freedom in Kansas.

Most fugitives fled of their own daring and volition, but Union troops and jayhawking raiders often facilitated this exodus. In Younger’s family, only one slave, a woman named Suse, remained with Bursheba. For slaveholding households, guerrilla resistance amounted to a defense of the property, wealth, and status that owning slaves represented in Missouri society.

Frank James was one of many guerrillas who had previously fought as a Confederate regular. James saw action at the Battle of Wilson’s Creek in southwest Missouri, near Springfield, but soon thereafter contracted measles and was captured by Union troops. Paroled in exchange for a promise not to take up arms against the Union, he swore an oath of loyalty to the United States and returned home to Clay County. Months later, though, the 20-year-old rejoined the war, now as an irregular fighter.

Guerrilla violence threatened Union control in many ways. In addition to attacking federal troops, irregular partisans sabotaged bridges, railroads, and telegraph lines. Mounted on horseback and wielding pistols, guerrillas typically struck quickly, and their familiarity with the surrounding landscape enabled them to dissolve into the woods with seeming impunity. Bushwhackers preyed upon Union households in Missouri and Kansas alike, and like jayhawkers across the state line, they employed terror as both a means and an end.

Missouri farmer John Dryden suffered repeatedly for his outspoken Unionist sympathies and antislavery beliefs. Guerrillas attempted to drive Dryden from his home in early 1863. The Vernon County resident held firm, though he spent many nights taking refuge in a nearby field. On May 27, however, five bushwhackers attacked once more and set fire to the family farm. John’s wife, Louisa, extinguished the flames, but soon thereafter the Drydens fled with their infant daughter to Kansas, where they remained for the war’s duration.

Confederate leaders were ambivalent about guerrilla fighters in Missouri and elsewhere. Irregular partisans, on one hand, were useful, serving to tie down vastly larger numbers of Union forces. On the other hand, the bushwhackers’ tactics of arson, robbery, and murder seemed to transgress the bounds of honorable combat. Quantrill and other guerrillas nonetheless sought and sometimes received formal Confederate commissions as partisan rangers.

## **Surviving a Guerilla War**

Civil war brought grievous personal losses to the border families, whose sons fought and often died in the conflict. Women were not merely passive victims, however. While violence and anxiety shadowed the most basic of human interactions, life did carry on. Child-rearing, farming, and market commerce persisted, their rhythms interrupted and terms now strained by deprivation and the exigencies of war. Mothers, sisters, and wives shouldered many of the responsibilities once held by men who had left to fight.

Years of guerrilla conflict, however, transformed the border in profound ways. Civil institutions withered and sometimes collapsed amid martial law and irregular violence. Immigration and the clamor for railroad development—key forces behind the opening of Kansas Territory—ground to a halt, at least temporarily. At the same time, the border’s population remained in dramatic flux, unsettled by years of bloodshed, drought, and fear. Native Americans, displaced time and again by the thrust of westward expansion, saw their tenuous claims further imperiled.

The Union army struggled to eliminate the guerrillas by force. Southern families and other sympathizers actively sustained the guerrilla resistance by providing partisans with material aid, including food, shelter, clothing, fresh horses, and information about the movements and strength of Union forces.

Brigadier General Thomas Ewing, appointed to command of the District of the Border in the summer of 1863, concluded that the most likely way to quell intractable violence was to eliminate the bushwhackers’ basis of support. “I can see no prospect of an early and complete end to the war on the border,” wrote Ewing, “so long as those families remain there.”

Federal troops soon began to arrest the wives, sisters, and mothers of known guerrillas and to hold them in buildings throughout Kansas City. On August 13, one of the army’s makeshift jails, a three-story brick building collapsed, trapping almost a dozen prisoners in the rubble. Five women died, including Charity Kerr, a niece of Bursheba Younger, and Josephine Anderson, sister of notorious guerrilla William “Bloody Bill” Anderson. Critics charged that complicit Union men knowingly placed the women in a dilapidated structure.

The border war reached its brutal climax on August 21, 1863. Just after dawn Quantrill led a band of 400 guerrillas in a surprise attack upon Lawrence, Kansas, an abolitionist stronghold and the home of Senator James Lane. To that point Missouri partisans had struck Olathe, Shawnee, and other towns across the state line, but none of those previous raids rivaled the ruinous carnage of that morning.

Quantrill reportedly told his followers to shoot any male old enough to hold a gun. By midday the bushwhackers killed between 160 and 190 men and boys, plundering and burning much of the town before escaping back into Missouri. Former guerrillas would later insist that the raid was a response to the Kansas City jail collapse, Lane’s 1861 raid on Osceola, and various jayhawker provocations.

The Lawrence massacre prompted Ewing to issue General Order No. 11 on August 25, 1863. The measure proved to be the most sweeping anti-guerrilla policy enacted by Union forces during the entire Civil War. Order No. 11 called for nearly all of the residents in Jackson, Cass, Bates, and northern Vernon counties to “remove from their present places of residence.” Inhabitants of Kansas City, Westport, and Independence—where federal strength was greater—were to be spared. Also exempted were those persons who could demonstrate Unionist loyalties to the satisfaction of local military commanders.

Order No. 11 devastated much of western Missouri. Several thousand people, exiled within a fortnight, streamed into the adjacent counties, where many communities were scarcely prepared

and often unwilling to absorb the refugee population. An additional provision, designed to keep guerrillas from foraging upon the countryside, empowered Union troops to seize the grain and hay crops of displaced families. Soldiers and bandits plundered abandoned properties and set many farmsteads ablaze. Once the flames jumped to the adjoining tallgrass prairies, fire quickly consumed much of Cass and Bates Counties, an area that came to be known as the “Burnt District.”

Ewing’s orders proved tremendously controversial. Outraged Missourians, including artist George Caleb Bingham, who immortalized the policy in his painting, *Martial Law*, charged that the army brought undue hardships upon innocent women, children, and even many Unionist households. Although guerrilla violence continued to flare nearly unabated in other parts of Missouri, Ewing’s defenders argued that Order No. 11 reduced irregular violence in the affected counties.

The guerrilla war along the Missouri-Kansas line raged through the summer of 1865. In spite of an army policy that offered no quarter to bushwhackers, partisans and outlaws continued to roam the countryside. Union officers had begun to allow the limited resettlement of western Missouri in 1864, yet relatively few households took the opportunity to return until the war’s end. Many families never came back to the border.

For some dispossessed families, embers of hostility smoldered long after the shooting stopped. Bursheba Younger died in 1870, having never returned to her antebellum home. Her younger sister, Frances Fristoe Twyman, captured the emotional toll exacted by years of guerrilla fighting, a domestic kind of warfare that was waged both upon and between border households. “To me it was a most cruel and unjust war, a war in which innocent women and children suffered most,” wrote Twyman. After a struggle so vicious and vengeful, questions of innocence, guilt, and justice would linger without easy resolution for those who survived and for the generations that followed.

## Suggested Reading:

Fellman, Michael. [\*Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War\*](#). New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Sutherland, Daniel. [\*A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War\*](#). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Neely, Jeremy. [\*The Border Between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Line\*](#). Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007.

Goodrich, Thomas. [\*Black Flag: Guerilla Warfare on the Western Border, 1861-1865\*](#). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Benedict, Bryce. *Jayhawkers: The Civil War Brigade of James Henry Lane*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009.

Younger, Cole. *The Story of Cole Younger by Himself, Being an Autobiography of the Missouri Guerrilla Captain and Outlaw, His Capture and Prison Life, and the Only Authentic Account of the Northfield Raid Ever Published*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2000.