

The Kansas Red Legs: the Dark Underbelly of the Civil War in Missouri

Good Afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Today, I'll be talking to you about the Kansas Red Legs **and the Dark Underbelly of the Civil War in Missouri**. My discussion, I hope, will give you insights into **why** Quantrill's guerrillas came so far east during the Civil War and were involved in the execution of soldiers at the train station in Centralia. They also fought a major battle where we now stand and annihilated Major A. V. E Johnston's Companies A, G, and H of the Thirty-Ninth Missouri Regiment.

It's important to emphasize to you that the Civil War in Missouri, **as it relates to the Missouri guerrillas and the Union Army**, was characterized, on both sides by what the U.S. Army today calls "**Total War.**" This meant, in Civil War days, that if a Union soldier captured a Missouri guerrilla, the guerrilla was executed, usually on the spot or soon thereafter. Union soldiers were dealt with in like manner. The Union Army started this **no quarter policy** of killing guerrillas in 1861, and the Missouri guerrillas quickly reciprocated that practice. You should view the massacre in Centralia and the destruction of the Union Army on this battlefield where we stand from this **Total War, Black Flag, no quarter perspective in order to understand it.** For instance, if the guerrillas in Quantrill's force had been surrounded and captured in the battle of Centralia, **instead of A.V.E. Johnston's companies,**

then, they would have been summarily executed afterward. Keep that in mind when you leave this battlefield and judge the men who **fought** on it.

One thing you have to remember firmly, also, is that the objective of the Western Missouri guerrillas, from the start of the war until its finish, was to protect their homes and property and that of their mothers, fathers, siblings, and kin from their Union enemies. Today, I'll be talking to you about one of the Western Missourians most vicious and violent enemies in the war. They are seldom talked about or written about. They were the *Kansas Red Legs*.

The term "Kansas Red Legs" is bandied around a bit in Border War histories. Some use it to refer to Jayhawkers, members of Jim Lane's Brigade, more specifically to Colonel Charles Jennison's regiment of the brigade, **the Kansas Seventh Volunteer Cavalry Regiment**. Others use the term Red Legs as an **all-purpose, generic** term to describe the enemies of Southern sympathizers in western Missouri. But if we are to understand our history correctly, **we need to know exactly WHO THESE MEN WERE**, not just **USE** vague labels as some historians do.

We need to know when the Red Legs operated, why they operated, where they operated, and what crimes they committed. But first, we need to know precisely who these desperadoes were. Because they **WERE a specific group of armed, named, now-known killers, who swarmed over the western**

border counties of Missouri and the eastern counties of Kansas, stealing the money of Missourians, robbing their farms of equipment, livestock, furniture, crockery, gold, and jewelry. And they often killed the older men folk who tried to stop them, often hanging them by their necks upon a tree, torturing them to learn where their money and valuables were hidden or just killing them outright. The young Missouri guerrillas led by Quantrill were the only defenders of Western Missourians against the Red Legs., the Union Army, and the Union Militias. The older men were back East fighting the Yankees.

Missourians need to know about these Red Legs. Academic historians and Kansans don't talk much about them at all. Look in the history books, in the indexes of books, and discover that most of these books don't even mention the Red Legs, and those that do skim over their atrocities with mild phrases and excuses and very few details.

In 1862, 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. Judge Bryce Benedict, a Kansan from Topeka, in**

2009, wrote a book, *Jayhawkers: The Civil War Brigade of James Henry Lane* for the University of Oklahoma Press, and Benedict denied Lane's brigade destroyed Osceola. ###Isn't that laugable and pitiful? That's the failed objectivity we are seeing about the Border War, even today, by what I call "Northern biased historians." Following the destruction of Osceola, Lane's regiments pushed north and destroyed Dayton, Columbus, Papinville, Morristown, Clinton, West Point, Harrisonville, and Butler, Missouri. Maybe you are one of those people who have only been informed about Lawrence, Kansas being burned! Missouri's history has been brushed aside.

In the spring of 1862, after Lane's rampage up the Missouri border, General Henry W. Halleck, commander of the Department of the Border, complained to Abraham Lincoln about Lane's outrageous conduct in Missouri. The president answered him: QUOTE: "I'm sorry that General Halleck is so unfavorably impressed with General Lane." END OF QUOTE. While Lincoln defended his **friend** Lane, he nonetheless had Jenison's regiment reassigned to Humboldt, Kansas, to isolate it from further 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 and require more U.S. soldiers to be assigned here to hold off Quantrill's fighters.

Now banished from action, Jennison **agitated for his promotion to brigadier general** and **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, QUOTE “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.**”END OF QUOTE. Powerful abolitionists who favored Jennison, however, **protected him** and saw that he was soon **released**.

George Hoyt, **Jennison’s second in command**, now was cleared of charges also, and returned to his role as commander of Company K of the “Jayhawkers,” now referred to as the **Kansas Fifteenth Volunteer Cavalry now fighting in Corinth, Mississippi, by May 18, 1862**, commanded by **Colonel Dan Anthony**. Anthony was the brother of Susan B. Anthony, the famous suffragette, and he had acted earlier as one of Jennison’s regimental field commanders during most of the violent, destructive Western Missouri campaign against **Missouri citizens**.

Jennison spent most of his time during the Civil War in **Squiresville, Kansas, waging war on his cronies with a deck of playing cards.**

By July 14, 1862, **George Hoyt**, was charged for stealing in his operations in the South, similar to actions he had conducted earlier in Missouri, and he was forced to resign his commission as commander of Company K, and he returned to Kansas, **where he and Jennison *secretly* organized THE Red Legs, a multi-mission outfit that resembled a modern Special Forces unit but was more akin to the Nazi Gestapo.** The Red Legs main objectives were to steal horses; cattle; livestock; money; jewelry; and 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, and to intimidate the people in general and to **assassinate wealthy, elite Missourians specifically.** George Hoyt was appointed by Jennison to be the **Red Leg's field commander.** **Did you know that George Hoyt was earlier John Brown's lead attorney at his trial for treason in Virginia after Harpers Ferry in 1858 and was even involved in a plot to break John Brown out of prison, an act of treason? Why weren't we told that in most of the Yankee histories?**

Most of the Red Leg's loot stolen from Missouri was processed in **Lawrence, Kansas at their headquarters in the Johnson House Hotel on the West side of Vermont St., a block west of Massachusetts Avenue,** the main street in

Lawrence. Rough structures constructed of straw were **erected** by the Red Legs in a ravine near Massachusetts Avenue, and stolen goods were piled high: Missouri highboys, pianos, sideboards, dressers, **anything valuable**. This loot was sold at periodic auctions conducted in the town. **Everyone in the town knew who took the loot, the Red Legs, and where it was from, Missouri, but they bought this loot greedily anyhow!** Writer Lucian Carr, a Kansas abolitionist at that time, described the town of Lawrence as a **QUOTE “a mere fence-house for stolen property” from Missouri captured by Jayhawkers and Red Legs. END OF QUOTE.** Another Red Leg base **existed at Six-Mile House on the Leavenworth Road, six miles from Quindaro, Kansas, just west of Kansas City.**

George W. Martin, secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, wrote in 1910 that QUOTE “the U.S. Army authorized the Red Legs to wear Union uniforms, and they received the “salary of a commissioned officer.” Martin said also that the men “were employed on the pay rolls [of the U.S. Army] at seven dollars each per day. **Union officer** Cyrus Leland Jr. said that **General Thomas Ewing, commander of the District of Missouri, Quote, “always had several of them in his employ.”** Thomas J. Anderson of Topeka said the **Red Legs were QUOTE “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.” End of Quote**

Besides Jennison and Hoyt, the organization included the notable **James Butler Wild Bill Hickok, William Sloan Tough** (known as Captain Tough), Walt Sinclair, Theodore Bartles, Jack Henry, and Red Clark. Many of the Red Legs **had catchy names, like criminals,** such as “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, **Quote:** “In the winter of 1862, I became one of the ‘Red-Legged Scouts,’” **END OF QUOTE** and he said that his leader **was the notorious Red Leg, Captain William Tough.**

The Red Legs were killers! Sore-eyed” Dan once complained when Jennison shot an old man, saying: “By G—d that’s the first time I ever saw a dog killed that had no teeth.” **END OF QUOTE.** **Little is known about most of the crimes the Red Legs committed because those Missourians who confronted them usually failed to live to tell the tale.** Historian Stephen Z. Starr said of them: **QUOTE,** “**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.**” **END OF QUOTE.** **No official letters, casual letters, or documents survived written by them, NOT ONE, to describe their operations, through their own deliberate INTENTION. They were like the CIA.**

The Red Legs ordinarily wore a blue Union military tunic and trousers extending to the knees. George Hoyt, **their field leader, dressed more casually BUT FLASHILY.** He was described once in Paola, Kansas, as **QUOTE,** “dressed in a suit of **black velvet**, red sheepskin leggin[g, a red silk handkerchief carelessly thrown around his neck, and a military hat with a flowing black plume. At his waist was an embossed morocco belt carrying a pair of ivory-mounted revolvers.” **END OF QUOTE. A pretty tony get-up!** George Caleb Bingham, the famous Missouri artist and a Union officer, in his famous painting, “**Order No. 11,**” shows a Red Leg in Union tunic, wearing Red Leggings, intimidating an old gentleman after murdering his evidently unarmed son. **Two other men wearing plumed hats, a Red Leg practice, are evident in the same scene. A fourth Red Leg, wearing scarlet leggings, loads loot on a wagon behind the third-mentioned Red Leg. A fifth Red Leg, more casually dressed, with his 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 and jewelry. This Red Leg thief is also wearing red leggings but no black plume in his hat. It’s George Hoyt, field leader of the Red Legs. Brig. Gen. Thomas Ewing is shown on horseback at the middle left of Bingham’s painting, fully demonstrating his connection to the Red Legs. Bingham’s painting portrays a violent, thieving,**

Red Leg Hey-day. Yankee historians have never noted these five REDLEGS IN THE PAINTING. WHY NOT! That's because they've cooked the books!

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

BLUNT SAID : “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 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!! That's what Blunt SAID about the Red Legs. That's pretty explicit!

Well now! Do you believe General Blunt? ### Thomas J. Anderson of Topeka, a former member of Blunt's staff says that Quote: "Blunt had many [Red Legs] on his staff," and also "had many of them on the pay roll." END OF QUOTE Blunt's admonition for his men to arrest Red Legs was just a cover up, a ruse, sent up the chain of command to commanding generals at higher headquarters to deceive them about his connection with these rogues. In this message, General Blunt disavowed any affiliation with the Red Legs. He even referred to them at another time as the "Forty Thieves." 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 one of his most famous photographs, Tough is shown WEARING Red Leggings. This memo to headquarters by General Blunt was PURE BALONEY!

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 Tough. 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 Union comrade.** Tough’s associates **said he was: “Tough in name and action.”**

Historian William Elsey Connelley, the secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society and a friend of abolitionists at the beginning of the last century, DESCRIBED TOUGH in his book, *Quantrill and the Border Wars*, **Quote:** “Tough lived in the woods, plundered from armed rebels, burned their houses, and killed the fighting population [of Missouri] without scruple. His plunder was divided among his men, who would sell it and get pay for their service. They belonged to no military organization, but ran an independent concern.” END OF QUOTATION. [ACTUALLY WE KNOW NOW THAT ISN’T TRUE, THE REDLEGS WERE OBVIOUSLY PAID FOR BY THE U.S. ARMY COMMANDER IN KS AND MO.] Connelley continues: “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. It proves dangerous, however, to suspend the law and give such characters as Tuft discretionary license to rob and murder. Where there is a fine horse in the way, or a personal enemy, Tuft’s discretion between Union and Secesh [secessionists] [is] not accurate.”END OF QUOTE

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, even to his sisters, though they knew he was a Quote, “red legged scout” END OF QUOTE, and traveled with “the Red Legs.” Clearly, an understanding of Cody’s later adventures as a U.S. Army Scout and Indian fighter par excellence, who won a Congressional Medal of Honor, are incomplete without considering the full, seminal effect and influence of these early experiences as a Red Leg had on the young, teenaged Cody. **The Red Legs molded Cody into a fearless, cold-blooded fighting machine and killer for the U.S. Army in the Indian Wars.**

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, yes, 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 new unit was referred to as the “Red Legs” or “Red Legged Scouts.”**

Josiah C. Ury, who was a Union **“captain of scouts from 1862 until the close of the war,”** served under **General Blunt**, where he admitted he wore “red and tan-colored buckskin leggings” as part of a squad of fifteen to twenty men called the “Red Legs.” When Dan Anthony became mayor of Leavenworth, Kansas, the Red Legs used the town as a place to dispose of stolen property.

Albert Greene, a soldier in the Union Ninth Kansas Cavalry, said of the Red Legs: QUOTE “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 . . .**” END OF QUOTE. **Greene was referring to the RED LEGS. I hope you in the audience have noticed that virtually all of my data on the Red Legs is supplied by Kansans more than a hundred years ago IN THEIR WRITTEN DOCUMENTS. Unlike modern historians these men didn’t shrink from acknowledging the Red Legs and talking about their crimes, NOR DO I!**

Buffalo Bill Cody admitted that as one of the Red Legs, he raided Missouri farms and settlements, adding: QUOTE, **“Few of us ever returned empty-handed . . . We were the biggest gang of thieves on record.”** END OF QUOTE. “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.” End of Quote. Like a good Red Leg, Cody provided no other details, period.

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, a 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 was mayor of Leavenworth, Kansas, **over and over!** And KU’s yearbook, even today, is titled, **What? Anyone? “The Jayhawker!” When do we get an apology from the political correctness experts at KU for this? When?? Who will be fired for this?**

What happened to some of the other Red Legs after the war? Captain Tough became a prominent operator in our Stock Yards in Kansas City, Missouri, and a famous horse breeder. **He should have been; he learned how to steal some of the best horses in Missouri.** William F. Cody became a famous Army Scout, the winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and the founder of Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show, and perhaps America’s greatest showman ever. Many of these unscrupulous raiders, 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 knew who these Red Legs were,** who these

scoundrels were who terrorized them, raided their farms, killed their fathers and brothers, insulted their sisters, and robbed their farms of money, jewelry, horses, cattle, mules, **and chickens. But they did know what they looked like!**

Red Leg, William Frederick Cody, who became the famous Buffalo Bill Cody a decade after the Civil War ended, fell in love with a beautiful girl in St. Louis, Missouri, Louisa Frederici. At 11 o'clock on March 6, 1866, at the Frederici home in St. Louis, a justice of the peace married Bill and Louisa, and a trip to Leavenworth by steamboat followed, where they would settle temporarily. Cody later described the steamboat trip in his autobiography.

HE WROTE: “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. Their actions seemed very strange to me.** After the boat had proceeded some little distance, I made the **acquaintance** of several families from Indiana who were en route to Kansas. A gentleman, who seemed to be the leader of these colonists, said to me, Quote: **“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 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, incidentally**]. 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 the ship long enough to allow the crew to cut fresh 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: **QUOTE** “. . . 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 [in 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. [END OF QUOTATION]

The target of the so-called “bushwhackers” was clearly Cody himself, and he obviously was recognized by some of the Missourians on the boat, who passed on his soon-to-be location to Cody’s enemies. Cody’s wife, Louisa, upon hearing the firing screamed and fainted. We are left to wonder what specific actions Cody had participated in while a Red Leg in Missouri that prompted such a violent altercation and vindictive attempt on his life. **Perhaps, we will never know.**

So with this little vignette written by Buffalo Bill Cody, I’ll end my discussion of the Kansas Red Legs. I hope you understand now who the Red Legs were **and** how menacing they were to ordinary Western Missourians and their guerrilla defenders. **Yes, the Red Legs performed stealthy, secret violence and war crimes on Missourians for the Union generals in charge in Missouri and Kansas, Ewing and Blunt!** Consequently, the Missouri guerrillas fought the Red Legs continuously. That doesn’t fit your ordinary, biased Civil War histories. I hope this discussion of the Red Legs will guide you to consider what happened at

the Battle of Centralia and in the town from a more balanced perspective. **Thanks for listening to my talk.**