

Modern War Studies

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The Cause Lost

*Myths and Realities
of the Confederacy*



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Forgotten Wars

vanced north into South Carolina. With the Federals on Morris and the other islands, backed by their fleet, and with Sherman now approaching from the rear, the Confederates had no choice but to evacuate the city to avoid being surrounded. On February 17, 1865, after every major Confederate city but Richmond had fallen to the enemy, the Southerners spiked their guns, destroyed their ships, burned their papers, and fired the cotton on their wharves and in the warehouses. In the confusion, fires soon broke out all over the city, and accidental explosions began taking lives. From the Ashley to the Cooper, Charleston was in flames.

Once the Federals occupied the city, though the fire went out, the fires of their hatred for the cradle of secession were only fanned. Despite genuine efforts by officers to contain Union soldiers, many of them looted and vandalized homes and public buildings at will. By April the city was nearly dead. Even Sherman, who could make war hell, was appalled. He visited in May 1865. "Any one who is not satisfied with war should go and see Charleston," he said, "and he will pray louder and deeper than ever that the country may in the long future be spared any more war."¹⁶ Happily, Charleston would be spared from any more war. It ended within weeks of the city's evacuation, and on April 14, 1865, broken in health and spirit, Robert Anderson, now a major general, came back to Fort Sumter. There, four years to the day since his surrender, he raised, once more the Stars and Stripes over the now unrecognizable mound of debris.

It flies there still, symbolic not only of the spirit and heroism of the people and soldiers of the city that would not give up but also of the determination of its would-be conquerors, who, though never successful, still never gave up. It was, after all, the spirit of the times.

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A Different Kind of War: Fighting in the West

IT WAS "WAR TO THE KNIFE, and the knife to the hilt." That was how many in the Trans-Mississippi west described the conflict they fought in the vast reaches beyond the great river. It was a war of brutality and savagery and outrage unparalleled in the American experience—all fought side by side with innovation and daring and pathbreaking in all the best traditions of American ingenuity. Perhaps nowhere else in the troubled continent in the 1860s were all the extremes of war so intermingled. Of course, it would be greatly misleading to maintain that the Civil War in the west was unique and apart from that in the east in the way it was fought. Men battled with the same weapons, for the same causes, with the same valor and desperation. Their pain was the same. On either bank of the Mississippi, blood was just as red.

Yet there were significant differences in the ways men made war, certain features that were distinctly western, features that led to a very individual kind of war, and nothing cast a greater influence over it than the nature of the men who were to fight that conflict. Men west of the river *were* different—of that no one had a doubt. They were still a new people, many of them immigrants and more of them no more than first-generation natives of the region. Their lean bodies spoke of the generations of rugged Southern hill people who had spawned most of them. In some the bronze in their faces recalled the Indian women their fathers had taken, just as the scars on their bodies told of the Indian men they had battled. Missouri was well settled by now, even urbane in areas, with an international flavor thanks to thousands of recent European immigrants, but for many of the other hard westerners, of Arkansas and Texas especially, Fort Sumter brought nothing very new. For them, life itself had been an intermittent warfare. Now only the enemy was different; the unending struggle to survive remained the same.

The differences showed most readily when these men—whichever side they espoused—found themselves thrown together with regiments from the more refined east. Happily for all, this did not happen often. Not infrequently,

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the men of high-toned outfits from the better parts of the east might find themselves encamped next to a regiment of hardscrabble Missourians. Inevitably complaints ensued. The unkempt westerners were dirty, they drank and whored, and they paid little enough attention to drill and almost none to the Sabbath. They smelled peculiar. It offended the sensibilities to be quartered beside such ruffians. Usually unsaid was the fact that the rakehells were also besting the easterners at cards, stealing their campsites blind, whipping them at marksmanship, and frequently scaring the hell out of them for the mere fun of it. It tended to be a little difficult to hold a teacup with the little finger elevated at the proper stylish angle when there was a half-crazed frontiersman practicing marksmanship on the teapot.

Indeed, while these westerners engaged in every manner of fun, shooting and riding appealed to them the most, and better yet in combination. After the Battle of Elkhorn Tavern, or Pea Ridge, in March 1862, as the Confederates made their withdrawal, the dejected lieutenant colonel of the Third Texas Cavalry heard firing in his rear. Fearing that he was being pursued by the Federals, he formed the regiment for battle, put a battery in position, and waited, expecting to see his rear guard come thundering up the road with the Yankees in hot pursuit. Instead just one man came leisurely riding up to him. "Is the enemy coming?" asked the officer. "No, colonel," came the reply, "it's just the boys shooting chickens out of the trees."¹

The informality of the Trans-Mississippian was evident in everything he did as well as in the way the people of the region behaved toward him. As with the armies of the east, a command moving toward a battle often lost a lot of stragglers and deserters along the way. But out here, nevertheless, as often as not an army also grew as it moved toward the sound of the guns. Out of the hills and towns sometimes scores of citizens, old men and young boys, simply appeared and attached themselves to the column, carrying their old squirrel rifles or, more often, double-barreled shotguns. Unorganized, untrained, they simply came along for the fight. The battle done, they would melt away again into the countryside from whence they had come. Confederate general Walter P. Lane recalled that just after the Battle of Mansfield in the Red River campaign of 1864 he met "two superannuated old gentlemen, with vengeance in their eyes and old double-barreled shot-guns in their hands, going down to participate in the battle." He told them that the battle was done and that they should go back home rather than join the army and consume its already meager rations. But the old warriors would not be dissuaded. As a result, one was nearly shot when

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he took an armful of corn for his horse from the commissary, and the other was put on picket with orders not to fire and promptly started a small stampede when he got bored and blazed away at a squirrel in a tree. The old men "enjoyed themselves hugely for about two weeks," recalled Lane, "when, seeing no prospect of murdering any of the enemy, they returned quietly home."²

Indeed, Lane was also evidence of the peculiar sense of equality out here. Being a general did not necessarily win a man any great degree of deference from soldier or civilian. One evening, riding alone in Texas, he could not find a house where someone would let him stay the night. At last one kind husband and wife let him sleep in the same room with them in their modest dwelling. Apparently, it did not occur to the general to tell them that occasionally he had been known to walk in his sleep. The next morning when he awoke, he came near his hostess, and she promptly screamed. Then at breakfast both his hosts behaved in a strange manner whenever he spoke. Finally realizing what must have happened, Lane asked if he had disturbed them during the night. "I should think you did, sir," came the reply. "Yelling and whooping like a wild Indian; upsetting the table and throwing the chairs, and raising Cain generally." In fact, for nearly two hours during the night the man had stood with an ax poised, intending to strike Lane down if the somnambulist came near enough. Three times the general had approached, but his host, "wanting to make a sure blow," waited for him to come one step nearer. Happily, Lane did not and finally lay back down and slept soundly the rest of the night, his host all the while standing vigil over his terrified wife, ax in hand. Lane was mortified at the story, apologized profusely, and soon thereafter left. In parting, his host said, "I want you to do me a favor." Of course, the embarrassed Lane agreed. "If you ever happen to travel through this country again," said the man, "please don't make it convenient to stay all night with me, for there is not a wild 'varmint' in the woods but I would rather sleep in the same room with than you." The men parted company mutually disgusted with each other, said Lane, "he for my nearly frightening the life out of himself and wife" and the general "for his trying to murder me."³ It seems hardly conceivable that any household in Virginia would deny lodging to Robert E. Lee, even if he rose in his sleep and danced about the bed singing, "Hallelujah," but out here a general was just another nuisance.

Perhaps it was because of all the other hardship and deprivation faced by men in the Trans-Mississippi that they had little time or patience for the privileges of rank and station. For one thing, existence could be simply miserable in the region at times. In winter there was no protection from the bitter cold,

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and in summer the winds blew sand and dust in the eyes. Even for those raised here life was a trial, and how much more so for those not native to the region. One Louisiana Confederate found the weather almost intolerable. "The heat here is suffocating," he wrote of North Fork, Arkansas; "the thermometer stands at 110°, and the prairie breezes are as refreshing as steam from an escape-pipe." The nights were not bad, "but the days perfectly awful with their suffocating atmosphere." "If you wish to imagine yourself in this country," he complained, "just get into a hot oven, and if there be any difference, it will be in favor of the oven."⁴

Equally taxing were the handicaps of shortage faced by the Trans-Mississippi Confederates and even those in blue. Pay was infrequent or nonexistent, weapons and equipment often badly worn with replacements scarce, and rations sometimes invisible. General John B. Magruder, commanding Confederates in Texas and the territories west, estimated his arms shortage at 40,000 weapons in 1863—meaning virtually every man in his command lacked a proper weapon. A year later he confessed that he could not campaign at all in the coming spring if not resupplied.⁵ Throughout the department generally, supply would never meet demand. And when sufficient arms and supplies were available, the vast distances they had to be transported to reach commands usually defeated the generals' attempts at distribution. And so the soldiers did without, lived off the land, and took their weapons, when they could, from fallen comrades and enemies. One Confederate leader actually armed his command, in a fashion, by sending them out to confiscate squirrel rifles and old shotguns from local citizens.⁶

Thus it was that these men of the west lived a war rather different from that of their comrades east of the river, and thus it was that they fought it in some ways uniquely their own. Many of these men, of Missouri especially, had considerable experience in a certain kind of fighting, for they had been involved in a shooting war of sorts since 1856, the days of John Brown and "Bleeding Kansas." Some 2,000 or 3,000 of them who lived in the counties bordering Kansas, and especially the hemp-growing areas along the Missouri River, had been active in the border warfare. It had been a time of bushwhacking and ambush, of swift raids and swift withdrawals, of innovative use of whatever materials came to hand. Old Brown himself, in his barbaric attack at Pottawatomie Creek in May 1856, used ceremonial broadswords taken from an Eagle lodge to murder and mutilate his victims.

That sense of innovation showed itself on nearly every battlefield in the

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region, and it appeared early in the war. In September 1861 when General Sterling Price's Confederates laid siege to Lexington, Missouri, neither side was well equipped for the major conflict that followed. Price gladly accepted the services of the odd local who came out of his parlor for the fight. One sixty-year-old farmer came from his house every morning to join Price's men, bringing his antiquated flintlock and a basket of fried chicken to tide him through the day. At dusk he simply went back to his fireside.⁷

A few days before the fighting began in earnest, a captain had suggested to Price that several score bales of hemp piled in a warehouse along the Missouri River might be useful in the coming battle. Price had well over one hundred of them hauled out and brought to his headquarters, but he did not use them until September 19, when—apparently without actual orders—a couple of his regiments began using them as breastworks. The next day General Thomas Harris took 132 of the bales and started to soak them in the river so they would not catch fire if struck by hot shot. But the water made the bales so heavy that the men could not haul them out of the river. Instead Harris had dry bales placed in a long line, perhaps as much as 250 yards in length, and then the men poured water over them.

Then began the advance. Some of the bales were pushed with poles from behind; others apparently were dragged by brave souls out in front. Mostly, however, three or four soldiers simply set their weapons aside and started butting the bales with their heads. As the long line of weed breastworks slowly advanced by fits and starts, other Confederates maintained a continuous fire from behind their protection, offering the Yankees nothing to shoot at in return. Even when a cannonball struck a bale, it would not penetrate; the cannonball merely rocked the bale back a bit before the headstrong attackers resumed ramming the bales forward. The Yankees even tried firing red-hot heated shot at the wall of hemp, hoping to set it ablaze, but the soaked bales refused to take fire. If they had, the resulting cloud from scores of bales of the mildly narcotic weed might have led to a battle unique not only to the Civil War in the west but also unparalleled in the annals of humankind! As it was, Colonel James Mulligan, commanding the Federal defenders, lamented that "all our efforts could not retard the advance of these bales." Within a few hours he surrendered, the victim of the ingenuity—and iron skulls—of Price's Missourians.⁸

Such examples of inventiveness, however effective, could seem almost comical by comparison with a far more frequently used—and infinitely more effective—technique: ambush. Though surprise was and is certainly a fair and

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desirable stratagem in warfare, it was always difficult to achieve with large numbers. In the eastern theater such devices were tried on occasion, but rarely with great effect. Widespread were the rumors early in the war that the Confederates had the routes of approach to Manassas protected by a series of deadly “masked batteries” ready to spit fire and death upon unsuspecting Yankees as they approached. As with so much else that was expected of war in the innocent summer of 1861, the masked batteries were mostly imagination, and not one of them materialized when the Federals marched on Bull Run.

But out in the west it was another matter. Perhaps as a result of experience in the days of Bleeding Kansas, and certainly of decades of experience at Indian fighting, the men of the Trans-Mississippi knew how to do more than talk about ambush, and the regular enlisted forces of both sides made excellent use of it. At Pea Ridge that same Walter Lane—who himself bore the scars of an Indian ambush in Texas years earlier—led his Third Texas in a charge up a hill, only to see suddenly two hundred Federals rise from the brow, and perfect concealment, to deliver a deadly fire. Shifting his position, he charged again, and this time—by his own estimate—he ran into yet another concealed force, this time numbering nearly one thousand. At the same time he saw the camouflaging brush pulled away from a battery of six guns not sixty yards away. He gazed in astonishment as they all blazed away, then called on his men to “fall back, or you will all be murdered!” Lane later recalled that neither he nor his men “stood . . . on the order of their going.”⁹ It was a scene repeated time after time out here by both sides, though raised to the level of perfection by a particular species of soldier whose exploits follow presently.

When going into battle, the soldier of the Trans-Mississippi was not expected to perform any differently from his eastern counterpart. Generals wanted the same things from their men, and their battle orders—when they issued any—were quite similar. Aim for enemy officers. Kill artillery horses. Wait until within range before firing. Aim at the knees. Stay quiet except in the charge. Leave the wounded where they fall. Yet there were a few things directed specifically at these westerners that might not have appeared in any one of Robert E. Lee’s battle orders. Prior to the fight at Prairie Grove, Arkansas, in December 1862, General Thomas C. Hindman admonished his men: “Do not break ranks to plunder. If we whip the enemy all he has will be ours.” As a result, he issued specific orders to his file closers on either side of companies to shoot plunderers on the spot. It did not help much, for even the closers were happy to loot when they could. All of these men were born scavengers.

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And a battle order could reveal one thing more about war out here: why it was different from elsewhere. For here hatred of the enemy became almost institutionalized as an element of military doctrine. In Virginia the armies fought, and certainly there were men who hated, but nowhere on a scale such as in Arkansas and Missouri. In so many cases it was but the continuation of animosities already years old when the war began. “Remember that the enemy has no feeling of mercy or kindness toward you,” Hindman told his army. “His ranks are made up of Pin Indians, free negroes, Southern Tories, Kansas jayhawkers and hired Dutch cutthroats. These bloody ruffians have invaded your country, stolen and destroyed your property, murdered your neighbors, outraged your women, driven your children from their homes and defiled the graves of your kindred.”¹⁰ Such rhetoric was hardly calculated to keep warfare on a refined level.

Hindman’s Prairie Grove order hinted at something else that was different about the war out here, at least in 1862. Most of the service arms performed much as they did east of the Mississippi. Both artillery and infantry served primarily their same functions, though the sheer vastness of the Trans-Mississippi required of them a degree of mobility unthought of in Maryland and Tennessee. But there was something unusual about the makeup of some of these western outfits. Hindman spoke of Indians and free Negroes coming against him. Of the Indians, more anon. But of the blacks, it can be said that here in the west a genuinely new chapter of the Civil War had its introduction.

Talk of raising black regiments commenced on both sides immediately after the conflict began. Surprisingly, even President Jefferson Davis had to turn down a host of requests from Southern blacks, free and slave, to become soldiers for the Confederacy. Little was done in the matter during the first two years of fighting. Senator James Lane of Kansas, however, did not wait. In summer 1862 he began pressuring Lincoln for permission to enlist blacks into the service and on January 31, 1863, mustered the First Kansas Colored Volunteers into the army. ✓ However, individual companies of blacks had been informally organized several months before, and on October 28, 1862, at Butler, Missouri, a detachment of Lane’s blacks battled with a force of Confederate guerrillas in the first action of the war in which blacks fought. The next year in battles at Cabin Creek, in the Indian Territory later to become Oklahoma, and at Honey Springs, the new regiment distinguished itself. The Confederates at Honey Springs, knowing that they would be fighting blacks, had brought slave manacles with them to the battlefield but were never able to use them. Though the

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issue of the black man's usefulness as a warrior would remain a point of controversy for some time yet, in the Trans-Mississippi it was first demonstrated that, given the chance, the black man would fight and fight well.¹¹

In only one branch of the service did the conduct of the war differ radically from that east of the Mississippi, and once again it was a difference that sprang from the nature of the people and the country. The plains and prairies were a nation on horseback. More than that, they were a people used to handling firearms as well and to using them from the saddle. As a result, the region was a natural spawning ground for hordes of cavalymen, North and South, but particularly on the Confederate side. Furthermore, the Trans-Mississippi service put to the test all the latest developments in cavalry tactics to a degree unheard of in the east. Indeed, the mounted arm rose to the greatest extent of its potential out here. Of course, it served all the normal functions—engaging in reconnaissance, raiding, escorting supply trains, and fighting as auxiliary to infantry. But quickly the nature of the region, and of the people fighting, pushed the horsemen beyond their traditional roles.¹²

Just how pervasive the cavalry was to become is evident in the figures for General E. Kirby Smith's command. At the end of 1864 he reported 39,700 effective troops in his Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department. Of that number, 22,800 were cavalymen, more than 57 percent.¹³ By contrast, in the department commanded by Robert E. Lee, horsemen rarely constituted more than 10 percent of the total. Indeed, so numerous were the horsemen that their numbers became onerous to both sides. Late in 1862 a Federal officer in Arkansas could complain that "cavalry are plenty among us, and go in any direction you may for miles you will find their horses hitched near every dwelling. They scour the country in every direction and generally help themselves to anything they wish." And if weary foot soldiers asked at a house for something to eat, the answer all too often was "The cavalry has been here and there is nothing left." No wonder that many Yankee soldiers regarded their own horsemen as mere vampires hanging on the infantry—doing but little fighting but first in for the spoils.¹⁴ It was an unfair assessment—typical of infantrymen's attitudes everywhere—but the excessive numbers of cavalry were a very real problem. The natural outgrowth of the need for high mobility in a region so vast, and of the inhabitants' preference for mounted service, the cavalry grew to such size that Kirby Smith had to commence a conscious program of reducing the cavalry's numbers that cut his mounted arm in half by war's end.¹⁵

In the regular pitched battles in the region, the cavalry played a role of con-

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siderably greater importance than in the eastern battles. At Pea Ridge, for instance, Southern horsemen went into battle alongside their comrades in the infantry and yet remained mounted and actually charged against a Federal battery. "So impetuous, so sudden was the charge," wrote a witness, "that no time was given the foe to meet the rushing host of horsemen. In less than five minutes the battery was captured, the infantry force supporting it shot down, ridden over and scattered like chaff before a whirlwind."¹⁶

Perhaps the most significant battle for Southern cavalymen was Prairie Grove. Though cavalry, particularly Confederate, played a large role in the battle and in the achievement of what few gains were to be had for Hindman, the



General Edmund Kirby Smith, who complained that the Trans-Mississippi was no "bed of roses."

Author's collection

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fight's real relation to the mounted arm lay in the future. With Confederate infantry driven out of Missouri and now Arkansas virtually for good and denied the interior bases needed for active campaigning, the situation virtually dictated that any future attempts to regain territory would rest with lightning swift and highly mobile raids by Southern horse. Thus, Prairie Grove became a moment that turned Confederate cavalry from an army auxiliary into a body of raiders unparalleled elsewhere in the warring continent¹⁷

Surely the premier example of cavalry, a virtual army of it, on a great raid



General Sterling Price of Missouri, one of the troublesome, often bumbling, officers who helped lose the perhaps untenable Trans-Mississippi for the Confederacy.

Author's collection

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is Sterling Price's 1864 Missouri expedition. Already the South had sent three major mounted raids into Missouri. In January 1863 cavalryman John S. Marmaduke led 2,400 troopers north out of Arkansas in an attack on Springfield. Driven out of the state, Marmaduke returned again in April and May to attack supply and communications and to assault the Yankee base at Cape Girardeau, not to mention looting indiscriminately from friend and foe alike, a trait in western Confederates that alienated much of the support they desperately needed. This raid, too, failed, but that fall yet another, deeper thrust into Missouri came when General Joseph O. Shelby led 1,200 raiders on a 1,500-mile ride that penetrated as far as the Missouri River, did nearly \$1 million worth of damage, and captured 6,000 horses and mules and 1,200 weapons, as well as more loot taken from friends.¹⁸

Then came 1864 and Price's raid. It, like both of Marmaduke's efforts, ended in failure. Yet in numbers involved on both sides, it would prove to be the major cavalry action of the entire war. Price left Arkansas with 12,000 cavalry, 1,000 of them unmounted and 4,000 without arms, to be sure, but still the greatest assemblage of cavalry in the history of the Trans-Mississippi. To meet him Federal generals Samuel Curtis and William S. Rosecrans assembled an army that totaled perhaps 20,000, more than 8,500 of them cavalry led by General Alfred Pleasonton. By the time the two armies met in the decisive battle at Westport, Missouri, on October 23, Price's numbers had dwindled through desertion and straggling to about 9,000. In what was to be the largest battle of the war west of the Mississippi, cavalry played from first to last a decisive role, though distinctive to this kind of fighting, Price's cavalry fought almost exclusively dismounted. Armed with muzzle-loading rifles that could not be reloaded easily on horseback, this Confederate cavalry acted chiefly as mounted infantry, riding to the battlefield, then fighting on foot. Numbers are very incomplete for the campaign and battle, but perhaps as many as 17,000 cavalrymen, mounted and unmounted, participated in the actions making up Westport, ranking it second only to Brandy Station among the great cavalry battles of the war.¹⁹

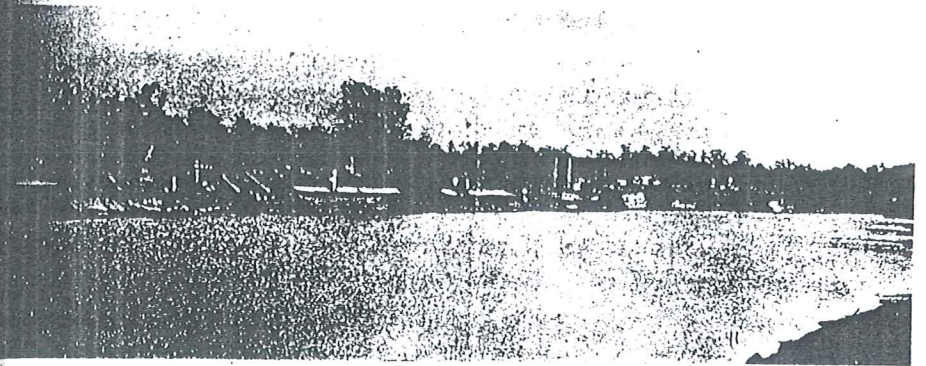
Thus it was that the Confederacy in particular had to rely upon virtual armies of horsemen for its offensive operations in most of the Trans-Mississippi, while its opponents as well looked chiefly to mounted men to counter the constant threat posed by Southern cavalry. Much as this differed from the nature of the war to the east, so, too, did some of the tactics used by horsemen out here stand out. In particular, while in the east cavalrymen were generally expected to ride to the battlefield and then fight on foot, in the west they pre-

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ferred fighting from the saddle when weapons and circumstances allowed. It was the mode of combat learned from the Indians, and the frontiersmen had been obliged to become adept at it in self-defense. Further, these fights in Arkansas and Missouri were not to take ground but to strike quickly, capture or destroy, and then swiftly return to friendly lines. Indeed, as the war progressed, it was with first surprise, then glee, that some defenders on either side, especially guerrillas who fought almost exclusively from horseback, saw opposing cavalymen dismount to attack or fight afoot. It was that unusual. In one of the innumerable fights in Arkansas, when General James M. McIntosh's command prepared to attack a body of Federal Pin Indians, the defenders looked with delight as the Confederate cavalymen got off their mounts. "The Indians on the hill raised a yell," wrote a Southerner, "thinking we were going to attack them on foot, and they, behind the rocks and trees on the eminence, could 'have cleaned us all up' before we could have reached them." But the Rebels were only tightening their saddle girths. Remounting, they charged up a hill so steep that some horses could not make the climb, and the Rebels routed the foe.²⁰ Much later in the war, outside Centralia, Missouri, men of William "Bloody Bill" Anderson's guerrilla command were approached by 147 Union mounted infantrymen. As the Yankees came near, their commander ordered them off their horses into a skirmish line. It was the only way they could use their long muzzle-loaders, besides which they were new recruits with no fighting experience. So surprised were Anderson's men that one of them cried out, "My God, the Lord have mercy on them, they're dismounting to fight!" When the mounted Confederates charged, they rode right over their opponents. Out here only a very brave man or a fool allowed himself to be separated from his horse in a fight. Friendly lines could be too far to the rear and a merciless foe too near.²¹

For the cavalry roving in smaller detachments, the favorite targets were supply trains, small garrisons, quartermaster warehouses, and telegraph lines. Yet now and then cavalymen, particularly Confederates, singled out a particularly unusual quarry: Yankee boats. The same was done occasionally east of the Mississippi, most notably by Nathan Bedford Forrest in Tennessee and Alabama, but nowhere with the frequency exhibited here. In June 1864 the noted Confederate Indian general Stand Watie led his cavalry and three pieces of artillery to attack the supply steamer *J. R. Williams* on the Arkansas River. In fact, it had become common practice for Yankee boats on these rivers to travel with a cavalry screen in front of them on either side of the stream, but the *Williams*

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The one near-great victory for the Confederates came when low water on the Red River almost stranded Porter's ironclad fleet, shown here above Alexandria, Louisiana, waiting for the water to rise.

U.S. Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

had no such protection and was taken completely by surprise. In this one capture, Watie took 150 barrels of flour and 16,000 pounds of badly needed bacon.²²

Other Rebel horsemen tried even more ambitious enterprises. General Walter P. Lane led his Texas riders and four pieces of artillery in an attack on the formidable Union ironclad *Essex* as it steamed up the Mississippi. It was a case of biting off more than he could chew. Lane stood directing his command's fire when the ironclad opened up. "I was on the levee," Lane wrote, "when a hundred and forty-pound shell struck the bank below me and exploded, turning over the planks I was lying on and piling about eight wagon-loads of earth on me. I thought I was murdered," he said, and he would not believe to the contrary until his men pulled him out from under the earth. For some time thereafter he continued to maintain that he was, in fact, really dead.²³

Perhaps the most ambitious such undertaking came during the Red River campaign when General Thomas Green and 750 Confederate cavalry on April 12, 1864, attacked Admiral David D. Porter's fleet of thirteen ironclads and seven gunboats on the Red at Blair's Landing. Though the cavalymen inflicted only minor damage, they hastened the precipitate withdrawal of the fleet, but the success cost them the life of Green, killed in the action.

The attack by Watie's men reflected yet another unique feature of the Trans-Mississippi fighting. Nowhere else in the Confederacy was there such a mixture of ethnic and racial soldiery. In addition to the black regiments in the Yankee service, there were two Colorado regiments composed chiefly of men of

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Mexican descent. On the other side, the Thirty-third Texas was led in part by Refugio Benevides and manned mostly by Mexican Confederates. And both sides employed several regiments of Indians, mostly members of the Five Civilized Tribes who had been removed to Indian Territory. Most notably of all, of course, was the Cherokee Stand Watie, the only Indian on either side in the war to rise to the full rank of brigadier general.²⁴

Naturally, the Indians were chosen as the most ideal cavalry, even if undisciplined. At the same time, they were also seen as an effective deterrent to one another. Federal Indian troopers would know best how to fight and neutralize Confederate Indians and vice versa. Because there were old intertribal rivalries dating back generations before the war, Union and Confederate authorities could play on them in enlisting young warriors to their banners. Indeed, even Watie, who was not only the foremost Indian leader of the war but also one of the finest cavalry leaders in the Trans-Mississippi, was not above mixing personal revenge with his military duties. He went some little distance out of his way in December 1863 to ride through Park Hill in Indian Territory to destroy the property of archrival John Ross.²⁵

In all the Confederates raised three regiments and two battalions of Cherokee cavalrymen, two battalions and a regiment of Chickasaws, three regiments and a battalion of Choctaws, two mixed regiments of Choctaws and Chickasaws, two regiments of Creeks, and one battalion each of Osages and Seminoles. All told, it appears that over 12,000 Indians served the Confederacy alone. Figures for the Federals are sketchy, but perhaps as many as 6,000 took arms for the Union.²⁶ That military authorities consciously attempted to arouse old tribal hatreds is evident throughout the course of the Indians' participation. Colonel William A. Phillips, commanding Federals in Indian Territory for a time, admonished his command as they were about to face Confederate Indians that "those who are still in arms are rebels and ought to die. Do not kill a prisoner after he has surrendered. But I do not ask you to take prisoners. I ask you to make your footsteps severe and terrible."²⁷

Impelled by invective such as this, even the best cavalrymen in the department, Indian or white, were all too often prone to pillage and plunder, or worse, and to a degree that would have shocked their eastern counterparts. Wherever Watie's command passed, Union citizens and Indians were robbed of whatever could be carried, and what could not be removed was destroyed. When William C. Quantrill, an infamous guerrilla, arrived in Lawrence, Kansas, on a raid that left the town in ruins, he announced matter-of-factly that his goal was "plun-

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der." He, like the Indians, was doing more than fighting a war; he was settling old scores. And all too many on either side out here used the conflict as an excuse to legitimize personal vengeance.²⁸

Alas, among the regular cavalry plunder all too often was not enough. In a regular battle, of course, aroused passions and bloodlust could make even well-reasoned men act out of character. In the fight at Westport, part of Shelby's command attacked 300 militia on the Mockbee farm. The militiamen had made the fatal mistake of dismounting, and when the Confederates charged, they scattered the horseless militia everywhere. Left behind were 30 men manning an antiquated cannon. They surrendered, but by the account of one of the militia, 24 of them were shot down.²⁹ At Prairie Springs, in Indian Territory, on September 14, 1864, Watie's command attacked a detachment of the First Kansas



General Albert Pike, chiefly responsible for maintaining Confederate-Indian relations and enlisting the disparate tribes—and their often brutal ways of war—to the Southern cause.

Author's collection

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Colored Infantry, routed it, and killed every black who fell into the command's hands. The Federals could be just as guilty of such excesses. In March 1863 when an Iowa regiment turned some Confederate prisoners over to the Thirteenth Kansas for delivery to Springfield, Missouri, the guards were barely on their way before they simply killed their charges and left them. Any regiment North or South might be capable of such acts, but some made it more of a habit than others, most notably Charles Jennison's Seventh Kansas "Jayhawkers" and Watie's Cherokees.³⁰

Somehow more remembered were the individual acts by which men wreaked their vengeance, isolated events of terror and mayhem. A Louisiana Confederate recalled meeting one Indian who boasted that "one of my brothers is a murderer," then later in the Battle of Pea Ridge saw the proof of it when some of the Confederate Indians indiscriminately killed whomever came in their way, scalping Union and Confederate dead alike. Watie's own son Saladin murdered a Federal prisoner, impelling his mother to urge him "to always show mercy." Watie himself constantly tried to control his men, condemning the brutality of many of the Rebel guerrilla bands with whom he found himself compared. He had, he said, "always been opposed to killing women and children although our enemies have done it," and he tried to restrain the passions of his men. "I am not a murderer," he protested. Alas, others could not say the same, and the institutionalized brutality that appeared early in the war in the Trans-Mississippi escalated throughout the conflict. Among regular troops, such acts reached their nadir for the Federals when Major John M. Chivington, on November 29, 1864, attacked Cheyennes and Arapahoes encamped at Sand Creek, in Colorado Territory. Several hundred women, children, and peaceful warriors were butchered. The Confederate counterparts were many. Witness the attack at Dove Creek, Texas, on January 8, 1865, when Texas troopers killed and scalped twenty-three unarmed Kickapoo men and women.³¹

Of course, it was among the irregular mounted men in the west that the real savagery appeared. For men who had been Jayhawkers long before the firing on Fort Sumter, the fighting out here began in the mid-1850s. Savagery, indiscriminate bloodletting, acts of revenge and barbarism, were commonplace for many of the men enlisting, or just attaching themselves to, the roving bands of guerrillas led by men of the stripe of Quantrill, Anderson, George Todd, and more.

It cannot be denied that these mounted terrorists did some genuine good service in the interest of their causes, particularly the Confederates. They sev-

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ered enemy communications, captured couriers, cut off or more likely murdered small patrols, sabotaged a host of buildings and bridges and telegraph wires, wrecked railroad lines, and destroyed towns. General Hindman observed that they also compelled "the enemy to keep there a large force that might have been employed elsewhere," though most of the Federal troops assigned to counter the guerrillas were local state militia that would not have been sent out of the state in any case.³² More than that, the guerrillas often succeeded in turning the local population against the enemy. Confederate raiders struck not only Yankee soldiers but also those civilians who might sympathize with them, offer them assistance in campaign, or give aid in adversity. Indeed, the irregular often made no distinction between a Federal in uniform or out. An enemy was an enemy, soldier or civilian, to be dealt with in like manner. It is no wonder that such an attitude quickly led to the most gross sort of excess under the legitimizing banner of the "cause." At least a few of the guerrillas were straightforward about it. One of Quantrill's officers was forced to state frankly that "guerrilla warfare claims no kinship to a pink tea." The partisans, knowing that they would themselves be killed if taken, resolved to kill first.³³

Understandably, the measures taken to combat guerrillas were of the most summary kind and in the end succeeded only in urging them on to greater excess, seeing that they had no hope of mercy if captured. Early in the war in Missouri Federal authorities published an order stating that any man serving in a partisan band for the South "forfeits his life." If captured, they were not to be treated as prisoners of war but to be shot or hanged at once. Thereafter, several department commanders issued directives of their own, all of which resulted in numerous summary "drum-head" courts-martial and even swifter executions. It became a matter of almost casual interest in the region. "Five rebels have been picked up in the brush . . . who cannot give a good account of themselves," wrote a Yankee lieutenant, "& they were taken care of." "I pity them, for Provost Marshall shows no mercy to such men."³⁴ Another Federal officer wrote to his commander of the capture of several enemy partisans, apologizing that he had been unable to bring them in as prisoners because, along the way, they had accidentally fallen off a log with nooses around their necks. In fact, a few Federals sensed that this draconian policy would only make matters worse. An Iowa officer, learning of the shooting of seven Rebel partisans, confessed that "I hope this may prove incorrect for it is establishing a precedent which must end in rapine & murder." He could not have been more right.³⁵

The individual acts of barbarism were too many to number. In October

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1862 in Cross Hollows, Arkansas, a purported Union man enlisted the aid of two Iowa soldiers in moving his family. He led them into an ambush in which they were killed. When a bushwhacker was taken and accused of being responsible for setting fire to woods at Pea Ridge where Union wounded from the battle were trapped, he was shot at once. In February 1863 near Forsyth, Missouri, guerrilla Alfred Boland was killed when a man posing as a friend caved in his skull with a broken plowshare as Boland stooped over a fire.³⁶ Ironically, the guerrillas did not entirely condemn their slayers, recognizing that each operated by the same simple, brutal code. Kit Dalton, supposedly one of Quantrill's gang, left a highly exaggerated account of his wartime service, which nevertheless spoke most accurately and eloquently on this subject:

The purpose of war is to kill and the object of its votaries is murder, sanctioned by Christian and pagan nations alike. . . . Civilized, barbarous, savage, guerilla, bushwhacking, jayhawking, and all methods of modern and ancient warfare have the same aim in view—death, devastation, pillage, and plunder. . . . Leaden death from a high power rifle in the hands of a regular is just about as permanent as death from a blunderbuss in the hands of a jayhawker. The “regulars” who answer to taps and reveille have no higher aim in view than to kill those who oppose them. . . . There is no more moral wrong in a small body of men seeking to take advantage of another small body than there is in a vast army seeking to out-manoeuvre another army of equal importance. They are both after the enemy's throat.³⁷

As individuals or in groups, the irregulars in the Trans-Mississippi went for their foes' throats with a gusto, even delight, that turned their grisly work of war into something macabre. The more flamboyant even publicized their work. Bloody Bill Anderson, after repeatedly besting the patrols in Missouri sent to take him, actually wrote a letter to the Union commander in the area, complaining about the poor quality of the men being sent after him. “They are such poor shots it is strange you don't have them practice more,” taunted the guerrilla. “Send them out and I will train them for you.” And Anderson's trusted little lieutenant, psychopath Arch Clement, became perhaps the first man of the war actually to sign his handiwork. After two Federal cavalrymen were killed in an ambush, Clement scalped them both, then mutilated their foreheads. He pinned a note to one of the dead men. “You come to hunt bush whackers,” it read. “Now you are skelpt. Clemyent Skelpt you.”³⁸

A few days later Anderson would kill twelve Yankees, scalping five and slitting the throats of three others. In time, the depredations of the irregulars on

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both sides became an embarrassment even to their own people. One Confederate general complained of Quantrill's men that they valued “the life of a man less than that of a sheep-killing dog.”³⁹ North and South would each attempt to control, and later to disband, their western guerrillas or else transfer them into the regular volunteer service, where restraints of law and discipline might be imposed.

However repulsive the individual acts of butchery were, there is no question that the most dramatic, the most savage depredations of these men came when they fought together, the bloodlust of each serving to stimulate the other. The raids on Centralia, Missouri, and Lawrence, Kansas, and the fight at Baxter Springs, Kansas, would all become synonymous with the worst features of warfare and would also characterize the most unique feature of the war out here—the utter savagery to which it could suddenly and frighteningly descend.

The Lawrence raid is well enough known. In August 1863 Quantrill led about four hundred of his men and other loosely affiliated bushwhackers on what was ostensibly a raid into Kansas for plunder. It was also a blow of personal vengeance against a town that had not treated Quantrill well before the war, and it was as well the home of Senator and General James Lane, arch-enemy of all Rebel guerrillas and a man guilty of some ghastly depredations of his own.

At 5 A.M. on August 21, the raiders rode into town. Soon their pistols were blazing. As their marks they took any male who happened to be on the street; then they rode over a company of 22 recruits camped in town, killing all but 5. As the looting and burning began, the raiders rode through the streets dragging men from their homes to kill them, setting ablaze other buildings that housed fugitives from their deadly accurate revolvers. In a four-hour orgy of bloodletting, about 150 men were killed and several more wounded without anyone fighting back. The only guerrilla casualty was one who was too drunk to ride out with his companions. Lagging back, he was shot by a townsman, then dragged by the neck around town as citizens took out their wrath by stoning him to death.⁴⁰

Equally savage was the Baxter Springs massacre six weeks later. On October 6, 1863, after unsuccessfully attacking a small Union fort, Quantrill turned his attention to a wagon train seen approaching. It was the personal escort and baggage train of General James C. Blunt, commanding Federals in Kansas. Incredibly, Blunt halted the train barely a quarter mile from the fort without hearing any of the firing from Quantrill's attack, and then when some of the guer-

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rillas approached—dressed largely in captured Yankee jackets—he at first mistook them for friends. The raiders' first volley revealed who they were, and their terrifying charge, reins in their teeth, pistols firing from either hand, so unsettled the few armed soldiers with Blunt that they barely made a resistance before fleeing in terror. One at a time and in little groups, the guerrillas rode down the panicked Federals, shot them, took their clothing and valuables, and then often mutilated the bodies. Of the 100 men with Blunt, only the general and a score of others escaped to safety.⁴¹ Then making his way toward Texas for the winter, Quantrill continued his path of blood. Proudly he would report to General Sterling Price that he "caught about 150 Federal Indians and negroes in the [Indian] Nation gathering ponies. We brought none of them through."⁴²

But Centralia paled all else, if not in numbers, then in sheer savagery. This time it was not Quantrill but his onetime lieutenant, Anderson, who led. On September 27, 1864, Anderson, George Todd, and 80 or more of their followers rode into Centralia and without any resistance pillaged stores and homes, got roaring drunk, and then saw in the distance that a train was coming. They blocked the tracks, and as the train came to a halt, out poured an odd lot of civilians and furloughed Federals from Sherman's army in Georgia. The civilians were sent aside and robbed, and the 24 Yankees were told to line up on the station platform. Anderson drew his revolvers and faced the doomed men, then yelled, "You are all to be killed and sent to hell!" The soldiers glurnly stripped their uniforms, and then despite their entreaties, Anderson and his men put pistols to their heads and one by one murdered all but one. To make sure of the work, every man was shot three times. Those who did not die instantly were clubbed to death, and at least two were scalped.⁴³

That was not to be all. Later that day after the raiders left Centralia, a detachment of 147 mounted Union infantry set out in pursuit of Anderson and Todd, and the guerrillas, riding high on their earlier success, made so bold as to lure the Yankees toward them. Then the raiders charged on horseback just as the Federals ill advisedly dismounted. The raiders rode right over them. The Federals fired but a single volley, then fled in panic, on foot. Gleefully Anderson's men rode after them, shooting at will as the now unarmed soldiers begged for their lives. Of the 147 who began the skirmish, 124 were killed. And the butchery had only begun. One man playfully hopped across the field on the backs of the Yankee dead, saying, "This is the best way to count 'em." The major commanding the Federals was scalped, along with 12 others. Ears and noses and genitals were chopped from the dead. Bayonets were jammed into the

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corpses for the fun of it. Guerrillas cut the heads from several of the slain and then had a high time rearranging them on different bodies. Some heads were mounted on the muzzles of guerrilla rifles and tied to saddles as souvenirs, and a few wound up unceremoniously perched atop nearby fence posts, facing each other with obscene phrases cut into their foreheads. It had been Bloody Bill's greatest day.⁴⁴

Sadly, this is the most distinctive single feature of the Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi: the unmitigated ruthlessness and senseless brutality to which it could sink at times and the unbridled passions that led to such deeds. The men of the west were not any more or less evil than were those in Virginia. They simply had more reason to fight from hatred than for a cause, while the vastness of the region and the rugged frontier edge clinging to it encouraged a relaxing of the restraint that in war separates the soldier from the savage.

Yet for all that set the war out here apart from the rest of the conflict, the most lasting impact of those differences remained to be seen after the conflict, not during it. For here, just as Fort Sumter had not begun the fighting, neither did surrender end it. Some Confederates, most notably General Joseph O. Shelby and his brigade, refused to accept defeat and instead rode south into Mexico, preferring to involve themselves in another internecine conflict rather than submit to Yankee rule. Thousands, including Price and Hindman, exiled themselves from their Arkansas and Missouri homes. Hundreds of others, having tasted blood and plunder, could not return to farming and clerking. A direct outgrowth of the Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi would be the so-called Wild West. A host of the desperadoes of the 1870s and 1880s learned their trade in the 1860s with Quantrill and Anderson. Frank and Jesse James, the Younger brothers, and many more found the war a proving ground for outlawry.

More than plunder, perhaps, these men were impelled by hatred. They began the war knowing how to hate, and the years that followed only nurtured that obsession. It was something that extended beyond just the bloodthirsty guerrillas. Shelby and his men hated and would not live again with the objects of their enmity. And the civilians hated just as much as the soldiers, perhaps more, which explains the sympathy the civilians later showed when Confederate raiders turned outlaw.

It is all illustrated so forcefully in the story of an unknown woman who roamed over the battlefield at Prairie Grove after the fight. A Yankee officer watched her as she walked among the dead, looking in their faces. Finally he heard her utter a smothered groan. She had found her Confederate brother,

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dead. "Her emotion seemed gone," said the Federal. Then a few yards on she found yet another brother, one she had not even known to be in the battle. After a brief release of grief, she passed on, her children clinging to her skirts. Then she found her husband lifeless on the ground, staring sightlessly into the sky. Soldiers about the field heard her utter a "wild unearthly shriek," then saw her fall over her husband's body. In an instant she arose once more, without tears, with no display of emotion from a heart that must have been shattered. The Federals watching could not but be moved. "The suffering of that woman none but God can know," wrote one. She walked from the field after leaving instructions for the care of her fallen men but paused to look back upon the field of dead. Within the hearing of scores of Yankee soldiers, in a voice that rang clearly over much of the bloody ground, she exclaimed, "The death of thousands of your number cannot revenge my wrongs."⁴⁵ In the mangled bodies of her husband and brothers, she had learned hatred. She and tens of thousands more would never forget it. In the Trans-Mississippi, that was to be the most lasting legacy of a war that had begun long before 1861 and did not end until long after 1865.

6

Forgotten Wars: The Confederate Trans-Mississippi

FOR MUCH OF THE WAR General Edmund Kirby Smith felt as if he commanded an island, one isolated even from its own capital in faraway Richmond, especially after the loss of the Mississippi to Confederate traffic. He felt genuinely neglected and even complained of how "the country west of the Mississippi has been exhausted of its fighting population to swell up the ranks of our armies in Virginia, Tennessee, and Mississippi." He had few men left to fill his ranks and replace his losses but "the aged, the infirm, and," as he put it, "the lukewarm." Everything ran in short supply, and what his department could produce was often as not siphoned away for the benefit of Robert E. Lee in Virginia or Braxton Bragg in Tennessee. Well might Kirby Smith complain, and he was not the first in western territory to fear that no one heard him.¹

By the time he uttered his complaint in September 1863, Kirby Smith commanded a department that, in theory, contained more real territory than all of the Confederacy east of the Mississippi River combined: Missouri, Arkansas, western Louisiana, Texas, Indian Territory, and Arizona Territory, which stretched all the way to the California border. This was a virtual empire, containing perhaps 600,000 square miles. It was also a wild and often turbulent region. Only months before the outbreak of war, the frontier U.S. Army was still battling Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches, and others. A combination of Federal troops and local regulators, such as the Texas Rangers and militia groups, preserved what peace there was on the border. Men in Missouri still sat bitterly divided over the issue of slavery, with the memory of the days of Bleeding Kansas still fresh. Far to the south issues were completely different in the territory along the border with Mexico, the largely Spanish-speaking population uninterested in this Anglo war and many still carrying resentments over the last war, when the United States had forcibly taken this land from their native country. A variety of motives and impulses coursed through this enormous territory, just as

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