



Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen

Paul is the Author of *Quantrill of Missouri*, *Quantrill in Texas*, *Quantrill at Lawrence and Lost Souls of the Lost Township*. Petersen is a retired U.S. Marine Corps master sergeant and a highly decorated infantry combat veteran of the Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is a member of the William Clarke Quantrill Society, the James-Younger Gang Association, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Jackson County and Missouri State Historical Societies.

Dr. John Winton Benson – A Bullet and a Ringlet of Hair

When Quantrill was commissioned a captain of cavalry scouts by Colonel Gideon W. Thompson on August 12, 1862, he organized and structured his company in accordance with regular army regulations. He had with him at this time 150 men who were likewise sworn into Confederate service. Immediately following, his men selected their officer: Captain, William C. Quantrill, 1st Lt., William Haller, and 2nd Lt, George Todd. His new structure included William H. Gregg as third lieutenant. Gregg later became Quantrill's adjutant; Cole Younger was one of those sworn in that day. Cole remembered, "It was within a day or two after the surrender of Buel at Independence that I was elected as first lieutenant in Captain Jarrette's company in Colonel Upton B. Hays's regiment, which was part of the brigade of General Joseph O. Shelby." Quantrill's new company duty roster was reported to regular Confederate authorities the next day. Richard P. Maddox was assigned as company quartermaster. Andy Blunt was assigned the position of orderly sergeant. John McCorkle and several other guerrillas were assigned as scouts. Former slave John T. Noland served as Quantrill's hostler. Many prominent physicians rode along as surgeons.

Dr. John W. Benson from Marshall Mo. offered his services to Quantrill. He was described as a robust man over six feet in height and a wonderful horseman. He had it in mind for several months to join Quantrill whose exploits were gaining accolades in the eyes of the Confederacy. Sometime later Benson approached Quantrill and was sworn into the partisan service by Quantrill himself. Benson took the guerrilla oath: I'll fight to the death, one or 5,000, never give up, never show quarter, never surrender." The guerrilla chieftain told Benson that he would serve as his surgeon and not as a fighter unless he so chose himself. Benson's fiancée Miss Ethel Lewis made him an elaborate embroidered 'guerrilla shirt' for him to wear.

Benson found himself assigned to Captain Andy Blunt's company of guerrillas. Quantrill directed Blunt to take his command to Saline County and recruit in preparation to the Lawrence raid. As the guerrillas rode into Marshall it stirred the excitement of the residents living there. One remarked on the guerrilla's appearance by saying they were all heavily armed and excellently mounted. Most wore tartan jackets and slouch hats with large ostrich plumes on them.

Most of the guerrillas in Blunt's company were from Saline County and by noon found their ways home to take dinner. The guerrillas that remained in town were on the lookout for any Northerners left behind. Dr. Benson was credited with saving several Northern lives that day. Two such men were Northern sympathizers, George Nye and his son William. On Benson's advice the two men were not shot. Benson administered an oath paroling the prisoners. A Federal soldier home on furlough, Pvt. Samuel W. Davis of Co. E, 6th Reg. MSM, was found by Benson. Being in Federal uniform Benson feared that one of his comrades would shoot him on sight but the doctor discovered Davis lying drunk in John Ferrell's feed lot. Benson secured a horse and made sure Davis was safely on his way home before he rejoined Blunt and the rest of his company.

A few days later as the guerrillas were gathering near the Blackwater River in Johnson County, Benson remarked about seeing Quantrill as he stood outside his tent making preparations for the raid. "W. C. Quantrill wore his Confederate colonels' uniform only when encamped, to impress his men with the fact that he held a regular Confederate commission. When (we) got ready to ride he appeared in his guerrilla outfit and threw his bundle into the wagon reserved for that purpose. His black slouch hat held a large ostrich plume... and

he wore a brown and red plaid 'guerrilla' shirt under his tartan jacket, and black jeans." Benson recounted that along the way to Lawrence before they got out of Missouri farmers' wives along the way rode up alongside the men to pass along tidbits such as cakes, pies, and bottles of whiskey to treat any wounded they might have. Many had pistols, and ammunition, coats, vests, and shirts for the guerrilla soldiers.

During the Lawrence raid Benson was accredited with saving many lives in town. During the raid many guerrillas reported that they saw Dr. Benson pulling many women and children from the cellars and wells where they had sought refuge when their houses were burned and helped them escape through a cornfield. Benson found a wounded Federal soldier shot in the thigh. He probed and removed the bullet and assisted him well away from the town. Benson was kept busy, not only with his own comrades but with wounded citizens; if they needed a doctor he was on hand. Guerrillas later said that he seemed to want death, for he courted it amid the smoke and flame.

On Quantrill's withdrawal from Lawrence Benson was riding alongside guerrilla Captain John Sims when they stopped by a farmhouse to feed their horses. The woman of the house asked the doctor for medical attention for her small child suffering from fever. Benson chose to stay with the child until the fever broke the next morning. The thankful woman tried to pay for his services but the only payment he took was before leaving he leaned over the bed, and with his keen Bowie knife, cut off a blonde curl from the sleeping six-year-old girl "I've seen so much blood that whenever I think of it, I will look at this, as long as I live."

Upon returning to his home in Saline County a Unionist friend of his pleaded for him to go to Marshall and surrender, that he would be treated as any other prisoner. Two days later Benson headed for the Union headquarters in Marshall. His pistols were taken from him and his hands tied behind his back. Benson had been known as a crack shot, but never fired a pistol while with Quantrill. Unfortunately, Benson was taken prisoner under the command of Major George W. Kelly of the 4th Missouri Cavalry, an officer known as a "martinet, who would hang a man on a whimper or a whim."

Benson was court-martialed in September, but all records of the trial were destroyed, and none ever got to Washington. Convicted for being a Quantrill man Benson was sentenced to be shot on October 15. On October 6 an excited messenger arrived with an important dispatch for Major Kelly. Kelly summoned his sergeant to immediately get a firing squad together and execute Benson. The sergeant asked for volunteers; not a man stepped forward. A squad was finally ordered to carry out the order but only complied if they could cover the face of the kindly doctor with a white cloth. As he sat on his coffin Benson only had one last request for the firing squad. "Shoot me below the face, boys." When the order was given all the shots entered the doomed man's chest. They buried Benson in a shallow grave north of town. When one of the soldiers asked why the hurry, another replied, "Shelby's Iron Brigade is coming up from Jeff City. If we're here, then we'll all dangle from these trees. No quarter for us if he finds out about Benson."

When Shelby and his men came to Marshall the Yankees were gone. Townsfolk told Shelby what had happened to Dr. Benson to which he replied, "If I get this man (Kelly), he will have the same sort of trial that he gave the doctor, who I understand did not kill anyone."

Benson's parents took his body from the shallow grave and brought him to town, where he had a real funeral among his erstwhile friends. It was then discovered, inside his guerrilla shirt and next to his heart, a little yellow curl of hair. A bullet had centered the ringlet he had taken from the head of the little Kansas girl whose life he had saved at the verifiable risk of his own.

Article by Paul R. Petersen

Photo on the cover Courtesy of Emory Cantey at CanteyMyerCollection.com

