



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.

The Blue Cut - Guerrilla Ambush Site

Urbanization has destroyed much of the recognizable Civil War sites in Missouri where once gallant Confederates battled the Federal invaders. Only the most devout researcher or historian can point to these places and recall the battles and bloodshed that marked these spots.

One such famous place was called the "Blue Cut" located on the Independence to Harrisonville road. The Independence-to-Harrisonville road ran north to south and offered two prime ambush sites. The first, the "Blue Cut" was six miles south of Independence on the Independence to Harrisonville road now named Lee's Summit road. Steep rock outcroppings lined each side of the cut making a good spot for the guerrillas to hide behind and fire upon any passing enemy soldiers. A telegraph line was strung along the roadway between the two towns, and the road also served to connect the stage lines which brought the news from as far away as St. Louis. The Little Blue River ran parallel to the road on the west. The surrounding terrain was wild, but some cultivation had begun in the bottomland, and here and there were some gristmills. The fertile valley and rolling hills marked an area that was superbly suited for hideaways and ambushes. Dense vegetation lay all along the riverbanks along with the line of rock outcroppings that inundated the surrounding hills.

The second site named "Manasseth Gap" was 15 miles from Independence also on the old Independence to Harrisonville road now known as 291 Highway. Urbanization and new highway developments have now erased this site. At this spot the road passed between two embankments. The cut was about fifty yards wide and thirty feet high with both sides lined with heavy woods. It offered both good observation and a good field of fire. The enemy would be helpless in the killing zone, but the guerrillas would be protected behind the terrain features.

After guerrilla Colonel William Clarke Quantrill's skirmish with the Federals at the Tate House on March 23, 1862 and the Clark House fight a week later, the Federals believed that Quantrill and his men were desperate and without horses. On both occasions the Federals had completely surrounded the guerrillas but they had bravely fought their way out of the Federal cordon. The Federals now considered themselves the hounds with the fox at bay. Federal Major Albert P. Peabody, Company D, of the 1st Missouri State Militia circulated a report that Quantrill's guerrillas were disorganized and on the run. He called for assistance from the other area outposts to bring in Quantrill and the remainder of his band. For this reason, the Federals concentrated in the Blue Hills of Jackson County with a vengeance.

The Missouri militia were held in the same vein as Kansas Jayhawkers. They were adept at plundering and murder on a vast scale. Given carte blanche to operate at will against the civilian community Peabody's forces scoured the countryside and exhibited a cruelty toward noncombatants unparalleled in history. Old men and young boys were murdered, women were raped, and homes went up in flames.

Feeling frustrated at being outgunned and outfoxed by the wily guerrilla chief, Peabody satisfied himself by burning every building of any Southern sympathizers living along the border. Union forces looking for Quantrill burned guerrilla Frank Smith's home in Blue Springs. As they were leaving the Smith home, they were fired on by the two Smith boys, who managed to kill at least two Federals. Half a mile away, Warren Welch and another guerrilla also fired on the Federals and killed six of them and one of their horses.



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Jeremiah Blythe, a local farmer and relative of guerrilla Cole Younger, owned a farm ten miles south of Independence on the old Independence to Harrisonville road. Here Younger had a camp on the east fork of the Little Blue River just across the valley of the Little Blue from the Reuben Harris farm. Peabody, now the commander at Independence, sent a scouting party of seventy-five men to find Younger or to get the residents to reveal where he might be found.

Blythe was warned that the Federals were coming. He kept away from his house that day, but the Union troops did find his wife and son, twelve-year-old Theodore at home. They took the boy to the barn and threatened to hang him if he did not tell them what they wanted to know. Young Blythe was not intimidated. He occupied them with conversation for several minutes until he saw an opportunity to escape back to the house. When he made a dash for the house, the Federals fired at him. Once inside he grabbed a pistol and made a mad run through the back door to the safety of some nearby timber but was mortally wounded before he could get through the yard and past the garden fence. He rolled himself over as the Federals rushed toward him, and he killed the first one to come near him. His second shot mortally wounded a second man, and his third shot wounded another. Before he could fire a fourth time, seventeen bullets pierced his body.

The Federals headed back to Independence. An old black man belonging to neighbor William Moore was on an errand at Blythe's house at the time and witnessed the bloody deed. Afraid for his life, he ran into the brush. There he came unawares upon Quantrill, Younger, William Haller, George Todd, and eleven other men. Noticing the great excitement of the black man, they coaxed the story from him. There was yet time for an ambush at the Blue Cut. Quantrill stationed men at each end of the passageway and some atop either side to guard the likely avenues of approach in case the enemy attempted to outflank them. The guerrillas lay on their bellies, behind the rocks or small trees with their weapons held at the ready. The enemy would be helpless in the killing zone, but the guerrillas would be protected behind the terrain features.

It seemed like an eternity before the enemy appeared. After a few minutes, tense, nervous muscles began to tighten. Weapons once locked firmly on target now began to weave perceptibly. Quantrill sensing their anxiousness spoke low in an almost inaudible whisper, "Steady boys! Get ready." Quantrill's calm, soothing voice brought them back on task. Steel muzzles inched forward and firmly locked on the arriving targets. On command, more than a dozen pistols, rifles, and shotguns belched leaden death on the unsuspecting soldiers in the bushy defile. Of the seventy-five Federals sent after Quantrill over sixty were killed while five were wounded and five barely managed to escape back to Independence. This fatal point of the Blue Cut was afterward known as the "Slaughter Pen."

Another fight occurred at the Blue Cut in June 1862. Lieutenant Cole Younger was ordered by Quantrill to take a detail of twenty-five men and ambush a detachment of Federals under twenty-one year old Captain William A. Long, Company A, 2nd Battalion, Missouri State Militia. Long was from Jackson County and had been a sergeant in Co B before becoming an officer. His unit had only recently been organized in Harrisonville during the spring of 1862. Younger had learned that among Long's men was a former guerrilla by the name of Shoat, who had enlisted under Quantrill a few months previously and then deserted, carrying with him valuable information. Younger was anxious to kill him.

At three o'clock in the afternoon of June 12, the unsuspecting Federals rode into the cut not realizing any danger. The guerrillas fought from the summit of the cut and it was therefore impossible for the Federals to reach them. After fifteen minutes of desperate fighting, the Federals broke and ran. Younger ordered a pursuit. Captain Long's horse was shot from under him and Shoat was shot in the back and died a few minutes later. The guerrillas took ten prisoners then released them on parole. The history of the 2nd Battalion, MSM, lists 3 officers and 48 enlisted men killed during the war of which twenty-seven were killed and wounded during this particular skirmish, while the guerrillas suffered the loss of only three men killed and five wounded.



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There has been much speculation and disagreement on the exact locations of the "Blue Cut" and "Manasseth Gap" but no other assumptions correspond completely with the postwar accounts of the guerrillas who fought there and with the terrain features that still exist today.

Ref: J. W. Buel, *The Border Outlaws*. Historical Pub. Co. 1881, pg 26-29, 43.
Paul R. Petersen, *Quantrill of Missouri*, Cumberland House Pub.2003, pg 124.

Article by Paul R. Petersen



Here are photos of Blue Cut. I believe this is looking north. This location is about 2 miles south of 40 Highway on Lees Summit Rd. It's south of Space Center drive and north of Harding drive. Check it out on Google Maps or Earth. Still a good spot for an ambush! Photos courtesy of Paul Petersen.