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Historians Corner, Donald L. Gilmore

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Who Were the Missouri Guerrillas? © By Donald L. Gilmore

Who were the Missouri guerrillas? They've been called a lot of things in the Army's Official Records and in histories for 150 years—"demons," "devils," "fiends," "thieves," "bandits," "bushwhackers"—even "white trash," the last in 1910 by the influential secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, William Elsey Connelley, in his book *Quantrill and the Border Wars*. But by using research techniques and not propaganda accounts, who were the real Missouri guerrillas?

Two sides express their views about this subject, first, the conventional historians who claim to dispense the whole truth to us about the Border War and who defend what is a Northern interpretation of the Civil War. And then, there is the other side who provide another interpretation of the war and who are often called by the traditional historians, the "Lost Cause" people, and who believe the conventional historians are espousing a Yankee interpretation concerning the issue. The Yankee historians frequently have chosen to call the Missouri partisans "bushwhackers," a term with negative affective connotations, rather than the value free term "guerrillas," and refer to them freely as "bandits" and Quantrill as a "fiend." Because two, long-time sides exist on this question, it behooves those who are interested in the truth to look for solid evidence on which to base their beliefs.

The evidence, it turns out, overwhelmingly reveals that the Missouri guerrillas were the sons and daughters of the elite class of slave owners in

western Missouri and their allies. That's provable but not widely known because the facts were originally ignored for two decades and later brushed over. How is this assertion provable? A Professor Don R. Bowen in 1977, *some thirty-five years ago*, wrote an article in a scholarly journal, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, titled, "Guerrilla War in Western Missouri, 1862-1865." In this article, Bowen explored the subject of the Missouri guerrillas. Bowen knew who the historians had long *claimed* the guerrillas were. But he wanted to verify who they were by identifying those using demographic data. How did he go about this? A very rational way, I think. He compiled a list of the guerrillas, mostly from Jackson County, Missouri, who fought in the Civil War, also the names of their families. He then looked up all these names in the official Jackson County Census of 1860.

Bowen examined this data using a number of *tests*: He wanted to know a number of things about the guerrillas and their families, tests that would determine what their financial and social status was in the community. These tests or standards were: (1) what was the value of their real property, the worth of their farms and homes in 1860? (2) What was their occupation? (3) What was the value of the personal property they owned in 1860? (4) How many slaves did they own? Slaves, you know, were expensive property, costing as much as \$1,500 per slave in those days, which would amount to about \$22,500 per slave in today's money, figuring an

increase in the inflation on money of 15 times its former worth; There has been an increase in the value of money since 1940 of about 11 times—that's a modest estimate. (5) As to the sons of the guerrilla families, he sought to know how many of the guerrillas served in the Missouri State Guard or the Confederate Army during the war, as well as in their ordinary guerrilla function. (6) Bowen also wanted to discover what ranks the guerrillas had filled in these two military forces.

That seems a rational way to evaluate who these guerrilla families were and their social status? So what did Bowen learn? What did he discover? I will tell you first what he *didn't* discover. He didn't find out that the guerrillas were poor people or white trash. He didn't find out that they were inconsequential people. In fact, the people he researched were not the type of people who, in mass, would be expected to be the fathers and mothers of alleged bandits and cutthroats. These were not the sort of people, the families of the guerrillas, that you would expect to raise and nurture a band of 300 thieves, because that was the general, aggregate size of the guerrilla force, and it included many more than that over the entire Civil War period, for many were killed and many others joined them.

Though slave owning was relatively rare in Missouri, Bowen concluded that one-third of the

guerrilla leaders owned slaves; three quarters of their parents did. That's a huge percentage. Of the guerrilla rank and file (very young men), one-tenth owned slaves, while half of their parents owned slaves (also a very high percentage). Because slave owning was rare in the general population, it is easily seen that these young men were from the more prominent, affluent families in their area. Bowen said that his data demonstrated that the guerrillas were not only *better off* than the general population of Jackson county, they were, generally speaking, "very much better off," in fact, "in terms of the times [as Bowen put it] *wealthy people, influential people.* [My italics.]

Providing further evidence of the social prominence of the guerrillas and their families, Bowen also demonstrated that three-quarters of the guerrilla leaders, at some time, were lieutenants or above in the army of the Confederate States or the Missouri State Guard. According to Bowen, the leaders of the guerrillas were the kind of men who, in ordinary times, would have filled community leadership positions. In addition, they were well-socialized members of their communities—an extremely important feature for guerrillas, who depend ordinarily on local support to survive.



Don Gilmore continued...

Bowen concluded that the guerrilla leaders were largely “the sons and heirs of established local elite.” *Over 90 percent of the guerrillas’ fathers held middle- to upper-class positions in the community, and their slave property alone was worth “double the county-wide mean” in value.* [My italics.]

Bowen contended that the Union occupation of western Missouri threatened the property of the guerrilla families, their status, and, in some cases, their *lives*. According to Bowen’s search of the index of the U.S. Army’s *Official Records* (the War of the Rebellion Records), the guerrilla families, in respect to the Federal Army, suffered “search of property, seizure of property [that is, livestock, crops, slaves, and so forth.] destruction of property [that is, burning of buildings, shootings of horses, and so forth], arrest or detainment of persons, forced bail or bond giving, forced removal of families, summary execution, [and] execution by courts martial.” According to Bowen’s count, ninety-three guerrilla families were subjected to the above sanctions during the war. The threat to the property of the young guerrillas’ families by the Federal forces was also a menace to the young guerrillas’ own future estates and status in their communities. In response, and largely for that reason, the young guerrillas waged war on the Federal army and its allies, the Missouri militias—but not for plunder, as many historians contend. I think this little discussion gives us a little better idea of who the Missouri guerrillas were and what they and their families had at stake in the fighting.

If the guerrillas were largely from the affluent classes of Western Missourians, then why have historians accused them of stealing from the people of Western Missouri and Kansas? The answer is simple: they often appropriated property to survive. Once the guerrillas took to the bush, it totally disrupted their lives; their ordinary ways of supporting themselves disappeared, and they were forced to sustain themselves, *as all guerrillas do* [my italics], by obtaining food, forage, and shelter from the local people, usually voluntarily but, if necessary, through some measure of coercion. The guerrillas’ preferred source of sustaining themselves, of course, was taking what they needed from their enemies—the Federal Army, Union supporters, and spies in the area. It should be obvious that guerrillas did not receive ordinary payments for their services like their enemies did the Union soldiers and Missouri militiamen. There are no biweekly or monthly checks in the mail or disbursements in army pay lines for guerrillas. What should be equally obvious is that guerrillas must be able to sustain themselves, often in the bush, by whatever means necessary, as all guerrillas do, worldwide. To consider otherwise seems extraordinarily naïve, unrealistic, or a dishonest, propaganda explanation for obviously explainable events and practices.

Some historians have referred to the guerrillas “stealing” and “plundering,” when, as we know, the Federal armies did the same thing, but on a massive scale. These same historians and propagandists call massive, organized army “stealing” by the terms “appropriating” or “living off the land.” Obviously, the Federal Army never paid for any “appropriated” Southern property, and it was lost to the owners forever, whether it was called “theft” or “appropriation” or some other specious term. From a Southerner’s perspective, the Union army was “plundering,” and there was no real distinction between the actions of guerrillas and Yankees—except in magnitude. The guerrillas received most of their forage and food, however, from friends. The only justification the Union Army could conjure for their “appropriating” of property was to justify it by the then-current “laws of war.” But these laws possessed no moral validity; they expressed no moral imperative, but were merely the codification of military and governmental expedients against a hated enemy. Even property appropriated by the U.S. Army from Union farmers was often not paid for, or paid for only after several decades had passed and when lawyers were summoned to attempt to enforce payment. So I hope this discussion clears up a few misconceptions about who the guerrillas were so that Missourians and Southerners have more ammunition, that is—the purest form of objective truth—to use against these people who have distorted our history, lied about Missourians, and continue to do so.

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