



Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen

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A Momentous Defeat of the 2nd Colorado Cavalry

In the year 1864, General Sterling Price was ordered to make a raid into Missouri in an attempt to recapture Missouri for the Confederacy after the state having suffered through three torturous years of Federal brutality and atrocities. In late June 1864, Price sent Captain John Chestnut into Jackson County carrying special instructions to the guerrillas preceding his upcoming raid by ordering them to soften up the Union defenders by raiding outposts, ambushing patrols, cutting telegraph wires, disrupting lines of communication, attacking foraging parties, burning bridges, and tearing up track before meeting him in Boonville in the heart of Little Dixie during the fall of 1864.

William Clarke Quantrill at the head of the most renowned guerrilla unit in the Southern army had already made his way into Howard County by late spring. Before he departed with a bodyguard of his most trusted soldiers Quantrill left his second-in-command, Captain George Todd, in charge of forty guerrillas with orders to continue to disrupt the Union army in Jackson County.

By 1864 Federal strategy had changed and now there were twice and many Federal soldiers patrolling along the border trying to put an end to guerrilla resistance. During the month of May the Federals had chased Todd's band from place to place, giving them no peace or rest. Newly arrived troops of the 2nd Colorado Cavalry, commanded by Col. James H. Ford, were stationed in Independence and had been actively combing through the Sni and Blue Hills on Todd's trail. They had made repeated threats that, if they ever met up with the guerrillas, they would exterminate the entire command. Todd decided to lure them out of their garrison and into an open ambush.

On a hot July 6th, eight miles south of Independence, on the Independence to Harrisonville road, the guerrillas gathered at an old rendezvous at the Howard farm. From here they rode to the nearby farm of the Widow Moore, and in the early morning hours they cut the telegraph wires along the road, knowing that it would bring the Federals out to reconnoiter. The guerrillas took up positions in the woods opposite the Moore farm and waited. Just down the road and only a quarter of a mile from the Moore farm was an open field in the half-mile-wide valley of the Little Blue. It was here the guerrillas planned to pounce on the anticipated Federal patrol. The ambush was set up along a long hill on the south of the Little Blue, where the road led up from the bottomland to higher land on the south. Commonly referred to by the guerrillas as Manasseth Gap, it followed up a branch between hills on either side and was covered with brush. Todd stationed pickets at either end of the ambush site to give the alarm when the Federals approached.

Manasseth Gap was an ideal place for an ambush. The ridge on either side was high enough that the attacking party could fire down on the road, and the sides were so steep it was almost impossible for a man on horseback to climb up. One of the guerrillas stated, "Most of our men were in the edge of the brush on the east side of the road. South of the cut, on the opposite side, was an open field that looked as though it had been in wheat for the last crop that had been raised on it." The guerrillas waited patiently until two o'clock that afternoon. Their patience lasted only another two hours. Todd and Lee McMurtry crossed the road and went into the Widow Moore's house after hitching their horses outfront. Almost immediately the pickets gave the alarm that about twenty Federals of

horses off the road and into the timber, where they tried to escape on foot. Yeager commanded his men to dismount and follow the fleeing Federals. Just as they dismounted, they heard someone yell, "Charge!" and looked back to see the rest of the Colorado cavalry, numbering around forty-two men charging down on them. Yeager immediately commanded the guerrillas to remount, face about, and charge. The guerrillas were still able to attack in the open field just as they had planned. Todd's men were all armed with double-barreled shotguns and a double brace of Colt Navy revolvers. One guerrilla remembered, "None of our men had less than two, and some of them three and four Colt's six-shooters, while the Federals only had one, with carbine and saber." Wagner's men carried Spencer carbines and an inferior patterned Savage revolver.

Amid the rearing and plunging of horses, carbines were useless. The smoke and the dust raised by the animals soon got so thick that it was almost impossible to distinguish friend from foe, and men had to be careful to identify their targets for fear it would be one of their own men.

The guerrillas charged through the Federal line with pistols blazing. Then they wheeled their horses and charged again with the same deadly effect. Seven times they charged and wheeled about until the Federals were out of ammunition with no time to reload. The Federals then attempted to charge the guerrillas with sabers. Armed with a double brace of revolvers apiece, the guerrillas had just begun to fight. When they discovered that the Federal guns were empty, they got as close to them as possible and used their revolvers to the best advantage.

Every man on both sides knew that it was a fight to the death; no quarter was asked or given. At the first rush, Yeager rode straight at Wagner. The Union captain shot off half of Yeager's mustache in the melee before he himself fell from his horse, shot through the body. They then had a hand-to-hand fight. Wagner was wounded but kept advancing on foot with a pistol in each hand. A Federal report stated: "The foe came rushing on until the combatants were mingled together, fighting a hand-to-hand encounter midst the fallen dead and dying

Company C, 2nd Colorado Cavalry under Captain Seymour W. Wagner were coming down the road. Todd and McMurtry ran out of the house and made their way down the road, closely followed by the Federal cavalry. Springing to the aid of his comrades, Dick Yeager ordered the rest of the guerrillas to charge. Seeing guerrillas gaining on them from the rear, the Federals guided their

until gallant Wagoner fell, mortally wounded.”

Some of the Coloradan's horses became unmanageable, so they dismounted to fight on foot. These men perished where they stood. One guerrilla remembered: "I saw a man draw his saber and start for me. I waited until he got nearly close enough to hit me with it, then I aimed a shot at his body. The shot must have struck a vital part for the saber immediately dropped from his hand. As quick as I possibly could, I fired two more shots. When I fired the last shot my pistol was not three feet from his body. His horse went on past me and the rider did not fall from him until he had gotten 15 or 20 paces beyond." The Coloradans were credited with fighting fearlessly and desperately, but without effect. They had shot their pistols too low, which resulted in only wounding three guerrillas; Ike Flanery, Henry Porter and Warren Welch, and killing five of the guerrilla's horses and wounding six or seven more. Todd took muster after this brief but hotly contested skirmish, and all his men answered up. The guerrillas killed twenty-seven of Wagner's men while capturing twenty-four horses, thirty revolvers, and thirty-two Spencer rifles. The rest of Wagner's men retreated into the timber or back towards Independence with the guerrillas in hot pursuit. Some of the Federals at this engagement were mounted on better horses and managed to escape. Dick Kinney, Frank James and Ike Flanery followed the routed enemy in sight of Independence, James killing his fourth man within fifty steps of the picket post. Afterwards the Coloradans were very cautious when they saw any of Quantrill's men and managed to keep their distance.

A Northern monument to the fallen of the 2nd Colorado Cavalry is standing in Woodlawn Cemetery in Independence, Missouri where nine of the killed were buried while the remaining eighteen killed were shipped back to their homes for burial.

Article by Paul R. Petersen

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Col. John H. Ford
2nd Colorado Cav.