



HISTORIANS CORNER, PAUL R PETERSEN

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Sam Wells

Though he survived the shells, he became a casualty of the war.

Sam Wells was just 14 years old when the Civil War started. Like many young men in Jackson County he was inextricably drawn into the conflict by personal events. His father George Washington Wells was a prosperous farmer living south of Independence in the Valley of the Little Blue. Following the Battle of White Oak Creek in August 1862, George Wells climbed a high rock ledge to watch Colonel William Clarke Quantrill's command rout a Yankee attack. As he was cheering for the Southern side the frustrated Yankee's turned their weapons on the unarmed spectator shooting him dead. Well's house was later burned to the ground. His son Sam soon found himself riding in Quantrill's guerrilla company trying to avenge himself of the wrongs caused by the atrocities of the marauding Kansas Jayhawkers. Wells joined a long list of Quantrill's men who suffered greatly from wartime atrocities. Sam's uncle, John Hagen was murdered by a Yankee patrol in retaliation for the telegraph wire near his home being cut. The Wells family lived in close proximity to one of the Youngers' farms in Jackson County. Henry Younger was a devout Christian man whose one of many generousities included the donation of 160 acres for the establishment of the Jackson County Poor Farm. If it hadn't of been for the war his eldest son Cole was slated to go into the ministry but the murder of his father by Union militia early in the war shaped his future in another direction. Besides the death of his father Yankees burned down three of the Youngers' homes causing their mother an early death.

Wells also fought besides the James brothers whose step-father, Reuben Samuels, was mercilessly hung by Union militia in Clay County in May of 1863. Fortunately his family managed to cut him down saving his life but not before a lack of oxygen caused him brain damage. Not far from

the house Jesse received a brutal scourging causing him to join his older brother Frank in Quantrill's command. Before Jesse rode off to join his brother Union militia visited the James farm stripping his mother to the waist and whipping her so severely with a black snake whip she miscarried.

After the war Quantrill's men fared no better. Bob and Cole Younger tried to return to their Cass County home and settle down but Union vigilantes continued to raid their farm going so far as to steal their horses, cutting the harness as the brothers were in the field plowing. Former Yankees attacked the Younger home, broke in the doors and windows, and rushed upon their mother Bursheba with drawn revolvers. They demanded to know where Cole and James were hiding. When they failed to find the former guerrillas, the soldiers carried young John Younger to the barn, placed a rope around his neck, and lifted him off the ground to get him to tell where his brothers had gone. Three times they pulled him off his feet, but he did not say a word and lost consciousness. They laid him on the ground, and with the rope still buried in his flesh, the vigilantes beat him with sticks and the butts of their rifles and hacked at him with knives.

History relates that Jesse James was seriously wounded by Federal soldiers while trying to surrender at the end of the war. With Frank James following Colonel William Quantrill into Kentucky in the war's final days he was not at first permitted to return to Missouri. When Frank did finally return to his home in Clay County he was challenged by four former Union soldiers who started a provocation in order to murder him, which resulted in Frank killing two and seriously wounding the third while the fourth

managed to shoot Frank in the hip causing a grievous wound. Friends carried Frank into hiding and summoned a doctor who saved his life.

Later on February 18, 1867, five former Union militiamen rode to the James farm looking for Frank and Jesse. Only Jesse was at home in bed still suffering from wartime wounds. His stepfather, Dr. Reuben Samuel, heard the soldiers on the front porch and inquired what they wanted. When they demanded he open the door, Dr. Samuel asked Jesse what he should do. Jesse saw that all the horses hitched to the fence had cavalry saddles. While a militiaman was hammering on the door with the butt of his pistol, Jesse placed his pistol up to the inside of the door and fired. The soldier on the other side fell back dead as Jesse threw open the door firing rapidly. A second soldier was killed as he tried to run, and two more were seriously wounded. The fifth soldier escaped into the darkness. From this moment on Jesse and Frank were forced to take to the bush as outlaws. This identical scene repeated itself many times to those who had belonged to Quantrill's guerrillas. On April 4, 1868, a gang of former Union soldiers surrounded the home of guerrilla Oliver Shepherd. When he came to the door he was shot twenty times, killing him in front of his wife and children.

Unable to find jobs or work their farms, having their taxes raised beyond reach by Yankee politicians now in power and being constantly hunted day and night but being too proud to suffer being forced from their homes some of these former guerrillas sought the outlaw path. From four long years of mortal combat shared with his friends and neighbors the Youngers and James', Sam Wells decided to join them once again. In July 1876, Sam was accused of being on a venture with Cole and Bob Younger, Frank and Jesse James, Clell Miller, Bill Chadwell and Hobbs Kerry when they robbed the Pacific Railroad at Rocky Cut near Otterville, Missouri. Two months later the same group of men including Jim Younger and minus Hobbs Kerry headed to Northfield, Minnesota to rob the First National Bank. To spare his family any retaliation that may ensue Sam Wells changed his name to Charlie Pitts. The robbery of the First National Bank was not without cause. Union Army Major-General Adelbert Ames, the son-in-law of General Benjamin "Spoons" Butler lived in Northfield. Butler got his nickname from stealing the silverware from Southern homes in Louisiana when he was commander of Union forces there. Cole Younger had learned that Butler had planned to deposit \$75,000 in the Northfield bank. The robbery proved a fiasco. Clell Miller and Bill Chadwell were killed on the streets. The rest of the robbers killed two citizens before leaving in a hail of bullets. Once outside of town Frank and Jesse decided to break away and head back to Missouri on their own. The Youngers were all shot to pieces during the getaway. Cole Younger told Sam, aka Charlie Pitts, that it looked like they would have to surrender and encouraged Sam to escape, but Sam replied he wasn't going to run or desert his friend. Cole looked into Sam's face and stated, "This is where Cole Younger dies!" Sam replied back, "Alright Captain, I can die just as game as you can. Let's get it done!"

The group of men were surrounded by a posse led by Sheriff James Glispin. As Sam stood up to fire the sheriff dropped to one knee and fired back, hitting Sam in the chest, killing him instantly. After the battle the Youngers were sent to prison. Sam Wells known only now as Charlie Pitts was turned over to Dr. Henry Wheeler, the medical examiner as an unclaimed body. The doctor took it to St. Paul, where it was dissected and the skeleton mounted. In 1990 a DNA match proved negative from Joe H. Wells, a great grand nephew. Some claimed that the body dissected was actually Bill Chadwell. Until more tests can be proven to the identification of the remains what is a fact is that Charlie Pitts' Smith & Wesson Russian Model 3 revolver used during the robbery is on display in the Northfield, Minnesota Museum.

Let those without sin, cast the first stone. The Bible

Article by Paul R. Petersen

Ref: Sam Wells photos courtesy of Joe H. Wells family
Author Shirley Wells – Samuel Wells aka “Charlie Pitts”
Paul R. Petersen – Quantrill of Missouri

