Historians Corner, Paul R Petersen

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Southern Heroines

The most profound impact on the Civil War along the Missouri-Kansas border was not from the political or military establishment but the impact of Southern ladies on the war's perpetuity. It was the Southern woman who oftentimes endured the cruelty and barbarity of the Union soldier and Kansas Jayhawkers. The first instance of brutality in Jackson County, Missouri, was during a Kansas Jayhawking raid through Blue Springs. While Jayhawkers were plundering the home of Strother Stone, Mrs. Stone protested, and a Jayhawker pistol whipped her into silence.

Southern women had their homes burned down, even the houses of poor widows. They had their personal property looted and Union soldiers ripped their clothes from their bodies looking for valuables and the most tragic personal attacks were rapes perpetrating by a vengeful foe. Besides raping female slaves in the presence of their owners the guerrillas of Quantrill's command were especially targeted. The sisters and cousins of guerrillas John and Joseph Hall, Buck, Rip and Kip Fields, Dick, James and Ike Berry, the sister of guerrilla Charles Longacre and Sally Younger, sister of Cole Younger suffered rapes by Kansas Jayhawkers. Even Cole Younger's house slave, Suse Younger, saved Cole's life during the war and refused to divulge where the family silverware was secreted even while being hung to force here to divulge its whereabouts. Women were banished from their homes for feeding their husbands and sons when they returned home on furlough.

The women of Missouri served the Confederacy in supporting its fighting men in a variety of ways. They served as spies gathering intelligence information and passing it along to Quantrill's command which attributed to Quantrill's numerous battlefield victories. Female guerrilla riders scouted on horseback, assisted in raids for supplies and horses, and even fired at Union forces. This mobility allowed them to aid the guerrillas by their reconnaissance and location of Union forces that were relayed back to the guerrillas. The guerrillas treasured information brought to them by women who served as liaisons for the guerrillas in hostage negotiations and oftentimes relayed the status of captured guerrillas and carried messages from Union officials.

If caught these women were arrested and thrown in prison. Besides the more dangerous work performed by the Southern ladies, Southern women organized sewing circles to knit socks and gloves and made clothes and blankets and sent in packages to be sent to soldiers oftentimes including a note of encouragement. At home Southern women would scrape their homemade linen in order to make lint to dress soldiers' wounds. This unraveling of cloth could be used to pack into a wound and was soft enough not to irritate the wound and also absorbent enough to collect any fluid that leaked from it.

The women relatives of Quantrill's men would collect lead and make bullets for the guerrillas. Many of these young Southern girls made an elaborate "guerrilla shirt" for a soldier in Quantrill's command, made from homespun or even elaborate velveteen, fancifully embroidered with hand-stitched flowers of all shapes, sizes and colors down the breast with two large pockets that could hold extra pistol cylinders during battle. Guerrilla Andy Walker recollected in his memoir that these guerrilla shirts were the guerrillas one very distinctive garment, often worn under the disguise of a blue Federal uniform,

During the war the Federal authorities made it clear that "secesh women" would be held responsible for their, as well and their children's words and any acts considered to be disloyal to the Federal government, but despite the risks involved these brave Southern women carried on. Their abuse only

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made their determination stronger. Many were banished from the state when arrested and released from prison. Sarah Jane Smith, a sixteen-year-old girl, destroyed two to three miles of telegraph lines between Rolla and Springfield, Missouri. Smith came from a northern Arkansas county but crossed into Missouri to help her male cousins who acted as guerrillas. After her arrest, the military commission ordered her to Gratiot Street Prison, where she waited for her sentence of execution by hanging. One Southern lady had a friend make a saw from a watch spring, set it in a tiny steel frame and smuggled into a prisoner at the Gratiot Street Prison in St. Louis.

Southern Baptist icon Lottie Moon who later became the matriarch of foreign missionaries carried secret coded messages through the Union lines to Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith. Many items were considered contraband by the Union authorities as giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Items such as letters, medicines, besides military supplies were not allowed to be forwarded to Confederate soldiers. When Yankees killed a guerrilla, they ordered that the bodies were not to be buried. Despite these orders Southern women cared for these dead Confederates by preparing a proper burial, having to dig the graves themselves.

Susan Langdon Vaughn, originator of Decoration Day which later became known as Memorial Day, would smuggle morphine, quinine and medicines through the lines, in quilted petticoats and bras, and even in the brim of her hat. She stated that, "If I had a thousand sons I'd buckle on their swords and send them to the Confederacy." After the war Southern women were responsible for building and maintaining the Confederate Veterans Home in Higginsville, Missouri.

Nineteen-year-old Anne E. Fickle of Lafayette County who made the "Black Flag" for Quantrill's command was sent to prison for 10 years for trying to help her guerrilla boyfriend Otho Hinton escape from jail. Along the border things intensified to such an extent that citizens described the period as a "reign of terror". Quantrill's guerrilla band relied heavily on women to purchase and deliver food, medicine, clothing, and to transport items to the men. By foot, wagon, or horse, these women took their supplies in baskets to guerrillas' hidden camps in the Missouri countryside. In August 1863, Federals arrested fourteen women relatives of Quantrill's men and imprisoned them in a three-story brick building in Kansas City. During their imprisonment Kansas Jayhawkers undermined the building causing its collapse resulting in the brutal premeditated deaths of five young Southern girls.

The most heavily concentrated group of Southern heroines was located in Vernon County in southwestern Missouri. Lenora and Clarinda Mayfield, Eliza Gabbert, Sarah Waitman, Nancy Burrus, and Nannie McConnell belonged to a local Vernon County guerrilla group under the leadership of Gabbert's father. Both of the Mayfield sisters ended up in St. Louis's Gratiot Street Prison. Transferred to the women's prison on Myrtle Street, the sisters escaped by unscrewing the hinges of the door with a knife while the sentries slept. They walked the railroad tracks back home to Vernon County, there to carry on their assistance to the bushwhackers.

Women worked in prison hospitals until the Union Provost Marshal determined that their work was "giving aid and comfort to the enemy" and halted their efforts. They were allowed to do so if they took the oath of allegiance to the Federal government but so many loyal Southern women were willing to do whatever they could to relieve and encourage the brave Confederate soldiers that many took the oath rather than be excluded from the hospitals. Besides serving as nurses they sat by the bedsides and wrote letters for wounded prisoners. As Quantrill lay dying in a military prison hospital in Louisville, Kentucky he was visited and cared for by Southern women related to his men. At a Quantrill reunion held after the war guerrilla William H. Gregg remarked, "Heaven bless the women, they were friends in need and indeed, no braver and truer women lived than the Southern ladies of Missouri, we often owed our lives to them."

Article submitted by Paul R. Petersen

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References: William H. Gregg Manuscript

Reminiscences of the Women of Missouri During The Sixties published by the United Daughters of the Confederacy