

A Note on Quantrill's Sack of Lawrence

by
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The peripheral events of the Civil War, besides adding to the mosaic of the larger conflict, are interesting in and of themselves. For example, the battle for Bleeding Kansas proved, in retrospect, to have been a decisive moment in the struggle for supremacy between free and slave forces. One of the most sensational incidents of the border warfare in Kansas, in the minds of Kansans, at least, was the sacking of Lawrence by Quantrill's raiders. William C. Quantrill, like fellow Missourian Jesse James, has been romanticized in film and fiction, but whether one considers him a hero or a villain, the fact remains that the Lawrence raid was the single most successful blow struck by pro slavery forces against the Kansas abolitionists.

The success of the raid, in large part, was the result of the care Quantrill took to ensure the element of surprise. Here, luck played a significant role, for had Captain J. A. Pike, stationed at Aubrey in Johnson County, been less prone to effect the better part of valor,¹ or had the residents of Lawrence been even moderately vigilant,² the chances for an unheralded entry into the town would have been negligible.

The exigencies of war—and blatant cruelty—also played an important part in Quantrill's unnoticed approach to Lawrence. At least ten farmers were pressed into service as guides over the nighttime Kansas terrain, then shot to death once they no longer knew the roads.³ As he neared Lawrence, Quantrill, especially fearful of forewarning the populace with a shot, ordered Joseph Stone, a personal enemy of guerilla George Todd, clubbed to death. This brutal act sickened at least one member of the band, but it did maintain the noiselessness essential to surprise.⁴

Recently I have come into possession of a communication that further substantiates Quantrill's concern to catch the town off guard. Written to Mrs. Robert Campbell by Mr. Erie Conger, both

of Wichita, the missive relates an episode in the Lawrence raid passed down by Mr. Conger's paternal grandparents. The statement was found in the papers on Kansas history collected by the late Mrs. F. L. (Carrie May) Carson, whose grandson, Mr. James Garver of Emporia, Kansas, gave it to me. It is dated 15 October 1941, and reads as follows:

My grandmother's name was Eliza Conger and she was the wife of John Locke Conger, who came to Kansas before the Civil War and settled in Douglas County taking a homestead and establishing a dairy.

At that time Kansas City was known as Westport Landing and the Congers were living just one-half mile South of the road that Quantrill traveled when they burned Lawrence and according to stories Quantrill stopped his troops at that time and did not know whether to burn out the Conger Ranch or go to Lawrence. But due to the fact that the ranch was visible from Mt. Orret [sic] at Lawrence, a distance of 12 miles they were afraid that the signals on the mountain would see the fire and smoke, so the ranch was saved through that manner.

In Hesper Township, Douglas County, Eliza Conger raised the first American flag that was ever raised over a school house in the state of Kansas. Eliza Conger was born in New York State.

A search of publications most likely to contain a reference to this experience of the Congers—histories of Kansas, books on Quantrill and the border wars, the Kansas State Historical Society Collections, the Kansas Historical Quarterly—was barren. Although only one of many such experiences on that fateful day, it does, nonetheless, add to our knowledge of the Lawrence raid, and therefore deserves to be preserved.

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NOTES

¹William Elsey Connelley, *Quantrill and the Border Wars*, New York: Pageant Book Company, 1956 (originally published in 1909), p. 315.

²Burton J. Williams, "Quantrill's Raid on Lawrence: A Question of Complicity," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XXXIV (1968), 143-49.

³Richard S. Brownlee, *Gray Ghosts of the Confederacy: Guerilla Warfare in the West, 1861-1865*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958, p. 122.

⁴Albert Castel, *William Clarke Quantrill, His Life and Times*, New York: Frederick Fell, 1962, p. 126.