

Robert W. Frizzell

An Instance of the Rape of German Women in Civil War Missouri

Historians continue to debate the character of the American Civil War nearly a century and a half after its end. Mark Neely, in a Harvard University Press monograph entitled *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction*, has challenged James McPherson's characterization of the war between North and South as a "total war." Neely contends the Civil War was "remarkable for its traditional restraint." In reviewing Neely's book, McPherson said in his own defense that while the war may not have been the "total war" that he called it a few decades ago, it was certainly a "hard war," filled with property destruction and civilian death.¹

Both McPherson and Neely use events in Missouri as a central pillar to support their contrasting positions. Of Missouri, McPherson says, "That state had a civil war within the Civil War, a war of neighbor against neighbor and sometimes literally brother against brother, an armed conflict along the Kansas border, which went back to 1854 and never really stopped, of ugly, vicious, no-holds-barred bushwhacking that came close to total war."² Neely, in writing of Price's 1864 raid into Missouri, says "Neither side fought without restraint. Neither unleashed the full fury of unbridled wrath. Events remained under control."³

This paper is not going to resolve the dispute between two of America's most respected Civil War historians, but it does assert that the guerrilla warfare in western Missouri in 1864 was, in one respect, worse than historians have known up to now. Specifically, there are good reasons to believe that "Bloody Bill" Anderson's men gang-raped a significant number of German immigrant women along the Lafayette County border on October 10, 1864.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us that in warfare, guerrillas are an irregular military force fighting small-scale, limited actions, in concert with an overall political-military strategy, against conventional military forces. Guerrilla tactics involve constantly shifting attack operations, and include the use of sabotage and terrorism.⁴

Guerrillas often strike against the civilian supporters of their enemies. Civil War guerrilla activities in general have become a topic of central concern since the publication in 1989 of Michael Fellman's book *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War*.⁵ Indeed, according to Mark Neely, "no book has had more influence on the modern writing of Civil War history."⁶ According to Fellman, ". . . of all regions [Missouri] produced the most widespread, longest-lived, and most destructive guerrilla war in the Civil War. Missouri provides a horrendous example of the nature of guerrilla war in the American heartland."⁷

On the matter of rape, Fellman's research in letters and provost marshal records did not lead him far beyond the traditional view. He says, "Primary in the code of these guerrillas was the injunction against harming women and children. [In their own self image, g]uerrillas were the protectors not the despoilers of home and family, and honoring this code was a daily demonstration of their ideals." He posits that the rape of black women was frequent, and that guerrilla behavior toward white women was often brutal and sometimes included forms of symbolic rape. Nevertheless, he says, "there are only infrequent reports of [actual] rape of white women and all of those second hand."⁸ While ". . . German-American men . . . were strung up or shot with special glee," ". . . German women were spared rape and murder."⁹ Fellman notes how proud guerrilla Sam Hildebrand was of his chivalry toward a German woman in the Ozarks during the course of hanging her husband.¹⁰

But research and analysis suggest that a notable exception to such generalizations about the treatment of women occurred in western Missouri just before Price's invading Confederate army reached the area during its great raid late in the war.

On the eve of the Civil War, a farming community of about 1,000 German immigrants and their American-born children lived in southeastern Lafayette County. The settlement had begun in 1838 and had more than doubled in the decade of the 1850s. Nearly everyone in the community opposed secession and only one of the 166 German households existing in the community in 1860 owned slaves. But the county as a whole counted 6,374 slaves that year, more than any other county in Missouri. A great many of these slaves were occupied in producing hemp. Lafayette County and the adjoining county of Saline produced two-fifths of Missouri's entire hemp

crop, and by 1860 Missouri had surpassed Kentucky as the greatest hemp producer in the nation. Although local Germans produced hemp without slaves, most western Missouri hemp came from Anglo slave-owners.¹¹

In the spring of 1861, Nathaniel Lyon, federal commander of the St. Louis arsenal, as he tried to save Missouri for the Union against Governor Jackson's Missouri Militia *cum* Missouri State Guard, issued federal arms to two companies of Home Guards from the Lafayette County German settlement. These companies stood among the Federal troops both at Boonville in June and at Lexington in September. When federal forces at Lexington were forced to surrender, the local Germans were paroled and went home. Despite its Lexington victory, the secessionist army under General Sterling Price soon evacuated the counties along the Missouri River and retreated hundreds of miles to the south. But the Germans of Lafayette County remained a small Unionist community surrounded by neighbors whose sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers made up a large part of Price's Missouri Confederate Army in Arkansas.

Western Missouri, largely secessionist by this time but occupied by the federal army, broke out into vicious guerrilla warfare lasting from early 1862 to late 1864. The Lafayette County Germans became a frequent target of the rebellious guerrillas. The German community was located only about 30 miles from the epicenter of the Missouri guerrilla movement in the Sni Hills of southeastern Jackson County. "Bloody Bill" Anderson's first raid into the community occurred October 5, 1862. Eleven German men were seized at an infant christening. Three were shot fatally, three recovered from wounds, and five were released unharmed. On July 13, 1863, Anderson and company again rode into the community. Four young farmers, who had served on active duty in the Enrolled Militia of Missouri the previous fall, were seized and shot dead.¹²

The third attack was by far the worst. Two weeks after the notorious Centralia Massacre, about a hundred guerrillas led by George Todd and David Poole, and containing guerrillas from both Anderson's and Quantrill's bands, rode into the German community. This was on the morning of October 10, 1864, as Price's invading Confederate army entered Boonville, some forty miles to the east. This time the Germans tried to defend themselves. After a small and ineffective attempt to ambush the bushwhacker advanced guard, a group of some twenty-five German home guardsmen, mostly too old or too young for regular military service, battled the main body of the guerrillas. All but one or two of the Germans were killed after inflicting very light losses on the guerrillas. The latter killed the German wounded and smashed the skulls of their victims. Anderson's men had done the same two weeks earlier at Centralia, and there, had even gone so far as to mutilate the genitalia of

their victims.

The only report by an eyewitness of the attack on the Lafayette County Germans describes the scene after the battle as follows:

It was a terrible sight among the moaning and the dying, the popping of guns, the shrieking of the women folk, who were vainly fighting to keep the beasts from assaulting them. All women were criminally attacked, some had to serve five men. Some old women were 75 years old but were still attacked and to make Hell complete, a dozen houses were set on fire.¹³

How is one to evaluate such testimony? It comes from Louis A. Meyer, who was eleven years old that autumn and lived on his parents' farm perhaps a mile from the site of the confrontation. He was to live there his entire life until his death at the age of 73 in 1927. He was the author's great-grandfather. Decades ago, his late daughter told the author that her father had witnessed the events of that day while hiding in a shock of corn. Unfortunately, Meyer did not write his account until a few years before he died nearly sixty years after the massacre took place. How much credibility can we give even an eyewitness account that is written over half a century after the events it describes?

Perhaps it will help to know more about the witness. Meyer was born on his father's farm of Hanoverian immigrant parents. His perhaps 6 or 7 years of parochial school education was partly in English but mostly in German. Although at home he always spoke *Plattdeutsch*, the north German regional dialect, he read, wrote, and spoke both standard German and English. We know that he avidly read the Milwaukee newspaper *Germania* and that in later life, he wrote short articles in English for a Concordia, Missouri newspaper. When his rural German church held congregational meetings, he often acted as presiding officer. Although a farmer all his life, he owned a typewriter and a set of Shakespeare. In part at the request of the Missouri German historian William G. Bek, in the early 1920s, Meyer wrote the equivalent of perhaps six typed pages about the massacre. This he composed from his memory, from conversations with other community elders, and from local church burial records.

On most points, Meyer's account agrees fairly closely with what facts can be ascertained from other sources. But all historians who examine Missouri's guerrilla warfare note the "bushwhacker code" and the paucity of reports of any sort dealing with physical harm to white women. This calls into question Meyer's report of sexual assault. Therefore, when the author first examined this issue more than three decades ago, he discounted his ancestor's testimony about gang rape. He presumed that during those long, intervening decades

between the event and Meyer's written account, hyperbole had got the better of the elderly man, and that he was "remembering" something that did not really happen.¹⁴

In the last dozen years, this author's view has changed. Edward E. Leslie in his book on the guerrilla leader Quantrill notes that in Franklin County, some of Jo Shelby's Confederate cavalrymen raped a German woman and tried to rape others a few days before the Lafayette County attack.¹⁵ Some of Anderson's men, perhaps the same ones who participated in the attack on the Lafayette County Germans, are known to have gang-raped slave women just eleven days later and only 30 miles away in Glasgow, Missouri.¹⁶ Fellman, himself, notes how guerrillas could lump together Germans and slaves. He quotes a letter from a Missouri guerrilla leader saying, "we cant stand the dutch and negros both."¹⁷ This calls into question Fellman's own later assertion, made specifically concerning possible attacks on German women that "a common race, differing ethnicity notwithstanding, placed Germans at least tentatively within the recognized racial community, marginally inside rather than outside American culture."¹⁸

It is also important to note that this event happened in October 1864, only three weeks before the end of most western Missouri bushwhacking activity.¹⁹ Restraints of behavior early in a war can break down over its course. Sometimes restraints can crumble just before the end.

Perhaps the key piece of evidence that lends credence to Meyer's claim is a letter from Bill Anderson that was published in the Lexington newspapers on July 7, 1864, just three months before the attack on the German community. This taunting and threatening letter was addressed to General Egbert Brown, the federal sub-district commander. Brown, as a military officer in a state under martial law, had arrested women in Lafayette County who were thought to be aiding the guerrillas. In the midst of a long paragraph addressing several other topics, Anderson wrote, "I will have to resort to abusing your ladies if you do not quit imprisoning ours."²⁰ It seems reasonable to accept the testimony of an eyewitness that this is exactly what happened 30 miles from Lexington on October 10. The Germans were known by everyone to be firm supporters of the Union. The fact that these women had obvious language and cultural differences with the bushwhackers would have made it easier for the guerrillas, in their own minds, to dehumanize them in order to facilitate sexual assault.

At the same time, it is clear that not every word of Meyer's account can be taken as literally true. Certainly not "all" the hundreds of German women in the settlement were attacked. What did Meyer mean by "all"—half a dozen women living closest to the massacre site or along the path the guerrillas followed—a dozen—two dozen? The question of how many leads to the

question of which ones, and this in turn leads to a question of just how much Meyer, the eleven-year-old boy, may have known and correctly understood in 1864 or later. Was Meyer's mother, then a 37-year-old farm wife living near the massacre site, one of those attacked? What of his future wife's mother and two grandmothers also living quite near the massacre site? Meyer's future wife, Marie Ehlers, was a two-year-old in 1864. Her mother, then 28, was to die before the daughter even reached puberty. The two grandmothers were 48 and 67. Would Meyer's wife have learned anything of the event as a child from her mother or in later years from her grandmothers? We know that Meyer's own mother could be unusually reticent about illicit behavior. Meyer and his younger siblings did not know that their oldest brother had a different biological father until Meyer's father's will was read after the old immigrant's death in 1901. Only then was Meyer's mother forced to reveal why her deceased husband had left no farmland to her oldest son. By that time, her children were between the ages of 36 and 52.

Despite the ambiguity, the caveats about what the witness might have known or have remembered, and despite the lack of less problematic testimony, it does seem likely that an appreciable number of German women were indeed sexually assaulted and by multiple men. It would appear that just before the end of most bushwhacking in western Missouri, guerrilla leader William C. Anderson carried out his treat to abuse, that is, to sexually attack, Union ladies in the area who were also German immigrants.

One instance of descent into gang rape near the end of the war does not change the whole character of the American Civil War or even of guerrilla warfare in Missouri. But it is likely enough to have happened and dreadful enough in its essence to be kept in mind by those who wish to consider the character of the guerrilla warfare in Missouri and the nature of the American Civil War itself.

University of Arkansas-Fort Smith
Fort Smith, Arkansas

Notes

¹ James M. McPherson, "Was It More Restrained Than You Think?" *New York Review of Books* (February 14, 2008), 42-44; Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 104.

² McPherson, "Restrained," 43.

³ Neely, *Limits*, 59.

⁴ *New Encyclopedia of Britannica Micropedia* (Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2003) 5: 544.

An Instance of the Rape of German Women in Civil War Missouri

⁵ Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989).

⁶ Neely, *Limits*, 41; Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009) summarizes recent research of the topic of its title.

⁷ Fellman, *Inside War*, v.

⁸ Fellman, *Inside War*, 206–7.

⁹ Michael Fellman, “At the Nihilist Edge: Reflections on Guerrilla Warfare during the American Civil War,” in *On the Road to Total War*, ed. Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler (Washington: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1997), 531.

¹⁰ Fellman, *Inside War*, 205–6.

¹¹ Robert W. Frizzell, *Independent Immigrants: A Settlement of Hanoverian Germans in Western Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 89–107.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Papers of Louis A. Meyer, in possession of the author.

¹⁴ Robert W. Frizzell, “Killed by Rebels: A Civil War Massacre and its Aftermath,” *Missouri Historical Review* 71,4 (July, 1977): 389.

¹⁵ Edward E. Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride: The True Story of William Clarke Quantrill and His Confederate Raiders* (New York: Random House, 1996), 167–68.

¹⁶ Castel, Albert and Thomas Goodrich *Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage Life of a Civil War Guerrilla* (Mechansburg, PA.: Stackpole Books, 1998), 121.

¹⁷ Fellman, *Inside War*, 70.

¹⁸ Fellman, “Nihilist Edge,” 531.

¹⁹ Bushwhacking largely ended in western Missouri when Price’s army was defeated at the Battle of Westport and driven back to Arkansas and Texas. Bill Anderson was killed in Ray County and George Todd was shot while scouting for Price at Westport.

²⁰ *Official Records of the War of Rebellion*, series I, vol. 41, part II, 76–77.

