Quantrill and His Missouri Partisan Rangers

The Politically Incorrect Truth

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There are few better examples of historical distortion in war and its subsequent politics than the demonization of William Clarke Quantrill and his Missouri Partisan Rangers. Nations often demonize their enemies to wage war. In the case of Quantrill, the distortions of war propaganda have persisted and even increased to justify modern political fashions.

Quantrill and other Partisans were depicted as psychopathic killers. Every Partisan victory was described as a massacre. Every vile practice and atrocious deed of Kansas Jayhawkers and Redlegs were turned around and attributed to Missouri “bushwhackers” and “border ruffians.” This did not end with the War or Reconstruction era. Much of this same propaganda still pervades the politically correct versions of Kansas and Missouri history.

Moreover, the ruthless conduct of Union troops in Missouri during the war and continued persecution of Partisans after the war forced many of Quantrill’s men into outlawry from 1865 to 1877. The most famous of which were Frank and Jesse James and Cole and James Younger.

The most outrageous propaganda was later picked up and sensationalized by Kansas historian, William Elsey Connelley (1855-1930). Many later historians used him as a source and thus compounded the distortions and outright lies. Connelley claimed that Quantrill’s father was a thief and embezzler, that there was no love in the Quantrill family, that Quantrill was a fiendish child who skinned his neighbors’ cats and that he shot pigs in the ear just to hear them squeal. He claimed that Quantrill courted women with suggestions of sadism and was a shiftless thief and bloodthirsty killer. No historical evidence supports these claims. In fact, the evidence from close childhood friends and later acquaintances in Missouri and Kansas completely contradicts Connelley. But many modern historians would rather have Quantrill the monster than Quantrill the protector and hero of the people of western Missouri.

The best source of information on the real William Quantrill is Paul R. Petersen, author of Quantrill of Missouri, who grew up in the parts of Jackson County, Missouri, where Quantrill lived and recruited his men. Petersen is a highly decorated retired Marine Master Sergeant with experience in guerilla warfare in Vietnam. Another good source can be found by searching for “Missouri Partisan Rangers” on the web.

The real William Clarke Quantrill was extraordinarily bright and exemplified high ethical standards. He strongly believed in adhering to the established rules of civilized warfare. He always preferred chivalry to the “black flag warfare” forced upon him and other Missouri Partisans by General Halleck’s 1862 General Order Number 2, commanding “no quarter” for Missouri Partisans. Quantrill was consistently adamant that no women or children should ever be harmed or molested. He was generally soft-spoken, but his orders were always clear and firm. He was scholarly, particularly gifted at math and a meticulous planner. He cared deeply for his men and was
Quantrill’s leadership style was consultative and he placed great emphasis on timely and accurate intelligence. Much of his knowledge of guerilla warfare was learned from reading Revolutionary War and early British Colonial history. He revered the Revolutionary War “Swamp Fox,” Francis Marion and the French and Indian War guerilla leader, Major Robert Rogers. But Quantrill had often lived with Cherokee, Shawnee and Delaware Indians and learned much of his guerilla tactics and superb horsemanship from them. He usually trained his men personally in both horsemanship and pistol marksmanship—shooting with a gun in each hand. He was said to be the best shot and best horseman in Missouri. John Newman Edwards—who was known to exaggerate a little at times—stated in a *Kansas City Times* article in 1872, that Quantrill, even with his horse at a gallop, could swoop down from his saddle and pick up a pebble on the ground. Both his men and the people of western Missouri loved and respected him.

Quantrill’s parents in Ohio held abolitionist sentiments and his early days as a school teacher in Kansas reflected their views. When Quantrill first came to Kansas, although not involved in politics, he sided with the “Free Soil” settlers in Kansas. Initially, he even believed Republican politician and Redleg-Jayhawker leader, Jim Lane, was a good man. But in 1858, he took a job as a “bull whacker” on a wagon train heading west. The company of Russell, Majors and Waddell was out of Westport, Missouri, and he found himself for the first time mostly in the company of Southerners who had a different view of politics. The company was unusual in that the principal partner, Presbyterian Alexander Morgan, paid seven days wages for six days work and observed the Sabbath. Along with two Colt revolvers, he also issued his employees a Bible and required them to attend a Scripture reading and the singing of a few hymns after Sunday morning breakfast. Quantrill subsequently began to measure the words and deeds of Missouri men versus the words and deeds of the Kansas Free Soil militias. By the time he returned to Kansas, he had a different view of politics.

Sometime in 1859 or 1860, using the alias of Charley Hart, Quantrill was acting as a private detective for the Delaware Indians, who felt that Jim Lane and other Jayhawker politicians had been swindling them out of their lands. This swindle was actually cited in the (Western) Cherokee Declaration of Independence on October 28, 1861, in Oklahoma, as one of their reasons for separating from the United States and allying with the Confederate States.

From Lawrence, Kansas, on July 30, 1859, Quantrill wrote to his mother that he and a friend were attacked by a band of Jayhawkers on the banks of the Little Cottonwood River and robbed of their horses and all their possessions. He told her that his friend was wounded but did not mention any wounds to himself. However, sometime in 1861, Quantrill told William H. Gregg, his Adjutant and other followers a different version of this event. This was that he and “his older brother” and a free black boy were attacked by James Montgomery’s Jayhawkers and, “his older brother” was killed, the boy was taken by the Jayhawkers and he himself was badly wounded. His life was saved by an Indian couple who nursed him back to health. Sometime later he joined Montgomery’s band to
On January 26, 1860, Quantrill wrote his mother in Ohio that according to his firsthand experience, the outrages that Northern newspapers claimed were committed by Southerners in Kansas were false. He told her that, in fact, it was the opposite party that was causing all the trouble and indicated his disgust for people who could sympathize with John Brown, the brutal abolitionist murderer. He further implied in that letter that he had some business to finish before he came home.

According to Petersen, as soon as Quantrill joined Montgomery’s band of Jayhawkers, he began to murder them one by one—leaving a tell-tale .36 caliber Blue-Point Navy Revolver bullet hole in the forehead of each victim. According to Petersen’s accounting, Quantrill personally dispatched 20 or more of Montgomery’s men. Some of the circumstances, however, indicate that Quantrill had help. In November 1860, Quantrill completed his vengeance against Montgomery’s men by betraying three of them who were attempting a raid on the Missouri farm of Morgan Walker. From there he emerged as a pro-Southern protector of western Missouri and leader of a company of Partisan Rangers in Jackson County.

Where did Quantrill recruit his so-called “border ruffians?” The core members of his original company were members of the Blue Springs Baptist Church. Most of them were Bible-believing church-goers who simply wanted to defend their homes and families.

According to Union Army reports, on May 10, 1865, a few weeks following the Confederate surrender, Quantrill and a small band of his men were ambushed by Union troops in Western Kentucky. Quantrill was shot in the back and died in a Louisville military prison hospital on June 6, 1865, a few weeks short of his 28th birthday.

According to former U.S. President Harry S. Truman, a native of Missouri,

“… Quantrill and his men were no more bandits than the men on the other side. I’ve been to reunions of Quantrill’s men two or three times. All they were trying to do was protect their property on the Missouri side of the line…”