

“Grisly Chapter In Local History”

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Originally published by The Ottawa Herald February 27, 1988

In 1860, noted New York journalist James Redpath wrote a book entitled “Roving Editor,” in which he added at the end a spine-tingling story he had been told in Kansas.

The tale involved a carefully hushed-up massacre from the recently concluded border war between free-staters and pro-slavery men.

Redpath wrote of the incident, but maintained the secret by omitting names and the exact location of the mass murder.

Recent research suggests that if this bloody event did take place, it occurred in Franklin County, and was kept quiet by its perpetrators and overlooked by historians for more than 130 years.

Redpath told of a band of pro-slavery marauders who took advantage of the political excitement of the times by committing robberies and murders in eastern Kansas. While they were only a part of the widespread terrorism of 1855-56, this group reportedly was especially unprincipled and was engaged in stealing slaves only to sell them farther south.

A group of free-state men, upon being convinced of the ruffians’ crimes, determined to exterminate them.

One cold, misty night, 30 men set out for the ravine where it had been learned the pro-slavery robbers were encamped. Redpath’s informant tells the story:

*We marched in silence until we came within a mile of the ravine, then the captain ordered us to halt. . .He divided us into two companies. . .in order to get the highwaymen between a cross fire. We could see their camp lights twinkling in the distance.*

*We then made an extended detour and slowly approached the ravine. Not a word was spoken. Every man stepped slowly and cautiously and held in his breath as we drew near to the camp of the enemy.*

*We knelt down until we hear a crackling noise among the brush on the opposite side, which announced the presence and approach of our other platoon.*

The 22 outlaws in the ravine also heard it and sprang to their feet in time to hear the captain’s deep, resounding voice give the order.

*Attention! Company!*

The cornered men tried to seize their guns and form a line, but it was too late.

*Take aim!*

*Every man of us, the informant continued, took a steady aim at the marauders, whose bodies the campfire fatally exposed.*

*FIRE!*

*Hardly had the terrible word been uttered ere the roar of 30 rifles, simultaneously discharged, was succeeded by the wildest, most unearthly air.*

*I saw no more. I heard no more. That shriek unmanned me. I reeled backwards until I found a tree to lean against. The boys told me afterwards that I had fainted.*

Every one of the 22 men lay dead. Redpath’s witness visibly shook when he said, *I can’t think of it yet without shuddering.*

The victims were immediately buried and the free-state men quietly returned to their homes.

Forty-four years later, an elderly man visited the rooms of the historical society in Topeka and asked to see Redpath's book. Turning to the brief story, Richard J. Hinton confessed that he had been one of the participants and was Redpath's source. He was, in fact, the one who had fainted at the carnage.

Hinton was well known to Kansas and Kansans. Born in England, he was a writer for Eastern newspapers. He became active in Kansas' territorial troubles, allied himself with John Brown, and later wrote "John Brown and His Men" among other works. He was in Kansas only a short while, but apparently returned. He did keep up his Kansas contacts until his death.

He helped to fill in the story's major gaps of Redpath's writings. The men killed were known as "Shannon's Guards," named for the pro-slavery Kansas territorial governor, Wilson Shannon. According to Hinton, the massacre took place in the fall of 1856.

Captain Charles F.W. Leonhardt had led the company of 30 vigilantes that night, a group organized in the general Lawrence area. The Prussian-born Leonhardt had been a bold, handsome, well-educated abolitionist who was active in the "underground railroad" in Kansas. He also was a member of the secret anti-slavery society of the "Danites," led by Gen. Jim Lane.

Another participant that night was John E. Cook, who later was captured at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, with John Brown and hanged.

Hinton described the massacre as taking place in a deep ravine on the Sac and Fox reserve, nears its eastern border, and "within five or six miles of the agency."

This latter information place the execution of "Shannon's Guards" in Franklin County, as the Sac and Fox agency was just west of the Greenwood Baptist Church in Greenwood Township. A study of historical and modern maps suggests the massacre may have occurred along the west bank of Appanoose Creek, about three miles north-northwest of Richter.

This astonishing story quickly prompts numerous questions, but two in particular stand out, the first and most obvious being, Is it true?

Probably.

However, at the point we only have Hinton's brief account, with no other confirmation. But it fits completely with the turmoil, violence and vigilante tactics prevalent in 1856. Kansas, especially the area encompassing Franklin county, was virtually a combat zone of terrorism, committed by both sides of the slavery issue.

It is unlikely Hinton would fabricate such an account, although his 1900 confession had 16 killed instead of 22. He was strongly partisan in his interpretation of the history of the territorial struggle, but even he could recognize that the cold execution of these men without due process of law did not reflect well on his free state cause.

It also is hard to imagine Hinton creating the episode to gain attention or to brag, only to admit he fainted at the horror of the scene. More likely, he was an old man finally purging himself of an awful secret. In a few months he was dead.

The second question is, If it's true, how could this massacre have remained virtually undiscovered all these years?

To begin with, there were no survivors—none of the victims lived to tell about it. They also were rough loners and rabble, not the type to have anxious wives and children waiting for them at home. In short, they probably weren't missed.

Also, there were no outside witnesses, only the men who committed the murders. Capt. Leonhardt, and most likely all of his men, were members of the secret "Danite" society. Their "knighting" ceremony included an oath to never reveal any details of their anti-slavery activities, or to identify fellow members "to the end of life."

To do so included numerous punishments, culminating with “passing through life scorned and reviled by man, frowned on by devils, forsaken by angels, and abandoned by God.”

At the time, “loose lips” probably would have brought a swift and deadly reprisal from other pro-slavery marauders. As years passed, the participants also may have been too embarrassed to admit and justify to later generations that in disposing of “villainous,” murdering guerrillas, they themselves became murdering guerrillas.

Earlier in 1856, five men were killed in the Pottawatomie Massacre near Lane, and two years later a like number were executed in the Marais des Cygnes Massacre in Linn County. If the “Massacre of Shannon’s Guards” is indeed true, both of those famous events pale in comparison.

If true, it also is the most astounding and most gruesome story in Franklin County’s history, as well as its most intriguing mystery.