

‘A living, breathing, aggressive, all-powerful reality’:

Men, Horses, and the Tactical Advantages of Guerrilla Warfare in Myth and Reality

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More than any other theater of war, Missouri's guerrilla conflict has been shrouded in mythology. Many of these legends were crafted by John N. Edwards and crystalized into a so-called history. *Noted Guerrillas*, his quasi-history of the war, turned William H. Gregg, Cole Younger, George Todd, Bill Anderson, and William Clarke Quantrill into heroes like the champions and near-gods of classical Greece and Rome. While nominally about Quantrill, Edwards offered a rather revealing description of the guerrilla as an archetype: "He was a living, breathing, aggressive, all-powerful reality – riding through the midnight, laying ambushes by lonesome roadsides, catching marching columns by the throat, breaking in upon the flanks and tearing a suddenly surprised rear to pieces; vigilant, merciless, a terror by day and a superhuman if not supernatural thing when there was upon the earth blackness and darkness." Whatever criticism has been directed at *Noted Guerrillas* for its Lost Cause message, literary flourish, and mythologizing, this passage should not be completely dismissed as fanciful imagery. The midnight rider Edwards sought to describe *was* more than a man. This all-powerful reality was two separate beings fused together – man *and* horse.<sup>1</sup>

At the center of both the myths and reality of the guerrilla war was the mounted man. Cut in the same mold as Sir Walter Scott's dashing heroes of medieval Europe, the guerrillas could only imagine themselves as chivalric knights as long as they were astride a charging steed. There was nothing romantic or dashing about trudging on foot for miles along rutted roads, through mud, over hills, and across streams; it was below these young men from the best families of Missouri. More than their attempt to embody a fabled past, the horse made the men who fought as guerrillas into elite soldiers for their time and place, a fact the guerrillas were well aware of. Tapping into the romantic imagery of Scott, Hamp Watts – a young guerrilla who fought with Bill Anderson – painted quite the image of his cohort. He remembered that, "When in line,

mounted on the finest of horses, the band certainly gave a ‘Knightly’ appearance.” Without adding to Edwards’ romantic view of the guerrillas, it was the case that the thoroughbred horses on which they were mounted quite literally made the guerrillas *super*-human. At a time when the vast majority of men fought on foot, the guerrillas had an incredible advantage in speed, strength, size, maneuverability, and power on both the tactical and strategic levels of warfare. The horse was essential to guerrilla manhood; if a man did not have a horse, he could not be a guerrilla. Horses made the guerrilla war possible, made the guerrillas men, and propelled them into realm of legend.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite the seemingly fundamental nature of horses to guerrilla warfare, historians have not examined the role of horses in the guerrilla war in much depth. Some historians have remarked that the guerrillas were universally mounted. However, what that might have meant in terms of the way the guerrillas fought or the role the horses might have played in the outcome of the war has escaped the historical discussion. When the subject is broadened to the role of the horse in the Civil War more generally, military historians contend that the cavalry became a less decisive factor than in previous conflicts. Some historians even assert that the horse had been rather insignificant in combat for some time. However, works that attempt to understand the significance of the horse within antebellum culture suggest that the horse remained important during the war, if only as a romantic symbol of chivalry.<sup>iii</sup>

By the beginning of the Civil War, Missouri was a horse culture. It stood alongside Kentucky and Virginia as a society that was built on equine power. Missouri was wealthier in horseflesh than Virginia or Kentucky and had a larger ratio of horses to the white population. Moreover, the counties in which the guerrilla war was waged had disproportionately high horse populations, rivaling or even overtaking some of the more well-known horse culture

communities in the South. The households that produced and supported the guerrillas had remarkably high quantities of horses in relation to the bushwhackers who needed horses.<sup>iv</sup>

Once in the brush, the guerrillas prepared their horses for combat. During this training, the relationship between horse and man became transcendent. Andrew Walker, one of the original members of Quantrill's band, recalled that, "On coming into possession of a new animal, the first thing a bushwhacker would do was to break him to leaping fences, logs and gulleys, and traversing rough ground." This was done "so that they would not fail [the guerrillas] in an emergency." A practice run like the one described above would help the horse and rider to get in step. As much as the guerrillas were instilling confidence into their horses, their horses were educating their riders so that they could better understand their capabilities. In the end, empathetic feelings coursed between a man and his horse and a mutual trust bonded the two together. Whether it was pain or joy, excitement or fear, they began to *feel* for each other.<sup>v</sup>

While the horse gave its rider the opportunity to speed into battle, the horse was more important in giving the guerrillas the ability to escape their enemies. For instance, the scatter technique was especially popular among the guerrillas. Harrison Trow recalled that, "It was a part of Quantrill's tactics to disband every now and then." Trow remembered Quantrill saying that, "Scattered soldiers...make a scattered trail. The regiment that has but one man to hunt can never find him." Reducing the band to its smallest unit, the individual mounted man, allowed each guerrilla to harness the full potential of his animal's speed and mobility. Individual horses could outrun the more structured groups of Union horsemen who tried to maintain their tight formation throughout the chase. Many of these free-wheeling horsemen scattered throughout the brush, riding in every direction, added confusion to the already challenging task facing their Union pursuers. Union General Thomas Ewing was all too aware of the deadly nature of this

tactic. He said of the guerrillas, “When assemble[d] in a body of several hundred, they scatter before an inferior force; and when our troops scatter in pursuit, they reassemble to fall on an exposed squad, or a weakened post.” Because of their ability to put distance between them and their pursuers, the guerrillas turned a successful retreat into an even more successful counterstrike.<sup>vi</sup>

The horse made the guerrilla hard to kill. A mounted guerrilla was able to make the most of his one life. Guerrilla strategy was to string out the conflict, making it a long, costly, and deflating proposition for their Union enemies. At the risk of stating the obvious, in order to undertake such an initiative, the guerrillas had to keep up the fight, which in turn meant that they had to avoid dying. Horses made it possible for the guerrillas to get out of deadly scrapes that would have ended the lives of foot soldiers or even novice cavalymen. After the Union turned toward the bloodier strategy of no quarter in the spring of 1862, the horse became even more valuable. When the enemy’s central purpose was killing – rather than conquest, pacification, or assimilation – then the greatest act of resistance became survival. For this reason, the horse was more important to the guerrilla than his gun. On horseback, the guerrillas may not have been the immortals that John Edwards made them out to be, but they were somehow *more* than mortal.<sup>vii</sup>

And, the guerrillas knew it. The horse gave its rider a great deal of confidence. Knowing that it was possible to escape even the deadliest situation could instill a spirit of invincibility in the heart of the guerrilla. At its best, this cockiness manifested itself in poise and coolness during a deadly firefight; it gave men the courage and daring to charge into the flank of a larger enemy force. In 1861, when Quantrill was confronted with the reality that a price had been put on his head and that he would be pursued by hundreds of Union troopers, he did not shrink from the moment. Instead, he calmly remarked to Andrew Walker, “They can’t catch me.” Furthermore,

given the uncertainty of war – any war – and the guerrillas own perception that they were fighting long odds, this aspect of self-assurance in their collective personality created a positive outlook in their day-to-day existence. This may minimized their fears. Although it is very difficult to gauge the guerrillas’ collective morale throughout the war, it seems that they were generally optimistic. Humor, admittedly dark humor, permeates the small amount of wartime record that exists and appears frequently in the post-war narratives.<sup>viii</sup>

Beyond the more obvious physical advantages they gave their riders, horses also assisted in the war effort in a variety of ways that were particular to each individual horse’s personality. Once in the brush, the guerrillas discovered unintended benefits of having their horses with them. For instance, William H. Gregg, while riding through the night tried to take his horse over the Smith’s Fork River Bridge. When he and his horse approached a covered bridge, the horse refused to enter it. Gregg originally thought it was because the bridge was too dark and the horse would not go where he could not see. In fact, it was the opposite. Gregg remembered that “a flash of lightening disclosed the trouble, the bridge was full of sleeping militia.” Joseph Bailey, another Confederate guerrilla, also found his horse to be helpful at night. Bailey remembered that he and his comrades stopped posting a guard at night once they realized that their horses were up to the task. The horses could detect someone at a much greater distance than the men ever could. If the horse detected someone, it would give a short snort, make uneasy movements, or display a listening attitude. In *Noted Guerrillas*, Edwards also mentioned this particular contribution of the guerrilla-horse. He said, “Well authenticated instances are on record of a Guerrilla’s horse standing guard for his master.”<sup>ix</sup>

The advantages provided by the horse were not without their costs. The animals needed substantial food, water, and rest. Without enough of any one of these things, horses would

decline in performance and get a guerrilla killed. Bailey stated that to feed and groom the horses was their first care, as they depended on their speed and endurance for survival. He even claimed that he and other guerrillas would go hungry to feed their horses. There were many off-hand references by Bailey and other guerrillas about watering their horses, something they seemed to do whenever possible. Any chance they could, they let their animals rest. If they were too tired, horses were traded out for fresh ones. Whether or not this horse was as in-tune with their rider as the mounts that had been broken in and trained as a bushwhacker mount is not evident. It seems though that a fresh horse, any fresh horse, was better than an exhausted one, or worse, no horse at all. Regardless of the quality of the new horse, after the exchange occurred, the original animals were often returned to their owners.<sup>x</sup>

While the rebels in Missouri were dealing with the old problems of caring for their animals, the Union occupying forces were trying to master new technology that had yet to be used in warfare. Union forces used both the railroad and the telegraph to try to subdue the rebels. These two new technologies enabled the overall strategy which the Union forces applied to the occupation of Missouri. They established garrisoned towns across the state. Many times, these were towns with the railroad running through them and/or with a telegraph office. From these centers of men, material, and information, the Union army hoped to control the countryside by sending patrols out to places where the guerrillas were reportedly located. Information came into a garrison via rider, railroad, or telegraph, and in response, the commander sent out the appropriate number of troops in the direction of trouble. Post commanders could also send requests for more troops or materials out to other nearby posts or even the department headquarters in St. Louis.<sup>xi</sup>

The guerrillas quickly showed just how tenuous the lines of communication and transportation for the Union occupation were. Once they realized the advantage that the telegraph lines gave to Union officers, guerrillas made sure to cut them whenever possible. The disruption of Union communications allowed guerrillas to attack one outpost without fear of troops from another post coming to their aid. Further, Union officers, who had become reliant upon the lightning quick communications between outposts, were forced into the uncomfortable practice of sending runners who were vulnerable to ambush by guerrillas. Guerrillas also made sure to burn railroad bridges whenever possible. This limited the ability of the central hubs in places like St. Louis to resupply the outposts across the state. By attacking the lines of communication and transportation the guerrillas isolated each garrisoned town, forcing the Union troops in a specific town to fight a local war against the rebel communities who controlled the surrounding countryside. Each post was a Union island in the middle of the angry rebel sea.<sup>xii</sup>

Even when they were able to use their technology against the guerrillas, it took special circumstances for it to be effective in direct ways. A raid on the town of Laclede made by Clifton Holtzclaw and his band of guerrillas offers a useful illustration of the ways in which horse-based warfare was successful against the type of warfare preferred by the Union army. On June 18, 1864, Holtzclaw and some fifteen other men stormed into the northern Missouri town from the west. The speed of their attack allowed the guerrillas to take the town with minimal resistance, though two incidents occurred. While they rounded-up the pro-Union townspeople into the town square, a man named David Crowder took a pot shot at the guerrillas from inside a building hitting Jim Nave and wounding him. Nave quickly turned and shot Crowder, killing him. Another man, Jonathan Jones, ran from the guerrillas despite their warnings. He too was shot

and killed. With the other residents of the town under guard, the guerrillas began taking contraband from the townspeople.<sup>xiii</sup>

Someone was able to escape the guerrillas, however, and alert the Union garrison at nearby Brookfield. Holtzclaw and his men would have the town to themselves for only a short while. While his men looted the town, Holtzclaw issued a warning to its inhabitants: “if any of his southern friends were abused...he would deal with them severely, killing two for one.” Perhaps even as these words were proclaimed by the guerrilla chief, Lieutenant Billings, in charge of the Union post at Brookfield, was being informed of the guerrillas’ presence in Laclede. Only two and a half miles away, Billings knew he had a chance of catching and killing the guerrillas. He put a soldier on every horse he could find and led the troopers toward Laclede. Before he left, he put the remainder of his force, those without horses, on a train which ran between Brookfield and Laclede.<sup>xiv</sup>

Two conflicts unfolded at Laclede, one which was atypical of guerrilla-Union trooper interactions and the other, a more common happening. The former was a running fight between the locomotive and a group of guerrillas. Whether through sight, sound, intuition, or perhaps the observational skills of their horses, the guerrillas were alerted to the impending arrival of Union troops. Nave, who could not ride as a result of his wound, was loaded onto the back of a buggy that had been used by the government to deliver mail. The hack was driven by another guerrilla, with a third man riding “shotgun.” It was escorted by two more guerrillas on horseback. The mail hack-turned-ambulance left in the direction of Locust Bottoms to the west of Laclede. Just as it lumbered out of town, the train from Brookfield rolled into Laclede. Seeing the guerrillas travelling down a road that ran parallel to the railroad tracks, the engineer sped up in pursuit. According to a Union report, as the engine chugged up behind them, the guerrillas “had some

distance to go by the side of the track, before they could turn, off (sic).” The guerrillas in the hack, even moving as fast as they were, had no chance in a head-to-head race with the engine. Crawling with Union soldiers armed with rifles and shotguns, the engine pulled up alongside the hack. From atop the train, the soldiers fired into the guerrillas like some grotesque version of a post-bellum buffalo hunt. Nave was killed, the two other men on the hack were wounded, and both escorts were mortally wounded.<sup>xv</sup>

In the brush, however, the mounted and unfettered guerrilla was better than his Union foe. While the remarkable running fight took place along the railroad tracks, Holtzclaw scattered the remainder of his men in all directions. They each rode out of Laclede as quickly as they had sprinted into the town. Billings tasked his subordinate, Lieutenant Lewis, with the job of pursuing Holtzclaw and his men. A Union report described his pursuit: “Lewis heard of [the guerrillas] from place to place...they had just gone on such a road ... but after riding in that direction 8 or 10 miles, would hear of them in another direction.” After some two days of tracking the guerrillas, Lewis and his men travelled around sixty miles and found themselves right back where they started – “within 2 ½ miles of Laclede again.” They never saw a guerrilla. One Union officer said of Lewis’ efforts, “This trip has again proven to me the perfect folly of chasing bushwhackers.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Despite the successes he experienced in the horse-based warfare he waged in Missouri, Quantrill left for Kentucky where both he and his horse would die in 1865. One of the first historians of the guerrilla war drew a direct connection between the death of Quantrill and the death of his horse, Charley. In 1910, William E. Connelley published *Quantrill and the Border Wars*, his anti-guerrilla response to Edwards’ book. Connelley claimed that the guerrilla chieftain’s “horse became a part of Quantrill, and the guerrillas believed he absorbed the nature

of his master and became a guerrilla.” They thought the horse to be “the best guard in camp and sounded many an alarm that saved the guerrilla band.” Connelley was sure that the “horse did absorb the nature of Quantrill,” because “[the horse] became vicious...He would strike, bite, kick, and squeal if approached by others.” Once, while resting in Kentucky, the guerrilla-blacksmith, Jack Graham set about shoeing Charley. In the process of paring the horse’s hoofs, Graham struggled with the horse, leaving Charley hamstrung. When he heard of the accident, Quantrill read it as a sign that his own death was near. The guerrilla chief was mortally wounded shortly after his beloved horse was ruined. In hindsight, it was simple to see why Quantrill understood Charley’s death as a prologue to his own demise: without a horse, a man could not be a guerrilla, and in the brush, a man who was not a guerrilla was as good as dead.<sup>xvii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> John Edwards, *Noted Guerrillas, or the Warfare on the Border* (Dayton: Morningside Bookshop, 1976 [orig. 1877]), 28; Matthew Hulbert, “Constructing Guerrilla Memory: John Newman Edwards and Missouri’s Irregular Lost Cause,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, No. 1 (March 2012): 58-81.

<sup>ii</sup> Watts, *Babe of the Company*, 9. Famously, Mark Twain, himself something of a guerrilla or partisan or some other unconventional soldier in Missouri, wrote that “Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war.” See Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1917), 376. For other examples of societies in which the horse was fundamental to culture, see Pekka Hamalainen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S. – Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>iii</sup> Gene C. Armistead, *Horses and Mules in the Civil War: A Complete History with a Roster of More Than 700 War Horses* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2013). For works on the guerrilla conflict that give scant analysis to the role of the horse in the war, see Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Daniel Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Sutherland, “Sideshow No Longer: a Historiographical Review of the Guerrilla War,” *Civil War History*, Vol. 46 (2000), 5-23; Robert Mackey, *The Uncivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861-1865* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004); Albert Castel, *William Clarke Quantrill: His Life and Times* (New York: F.Fell, 1962); Castel, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Castel and Thomas Goodrich, *Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage life of a Civil War Guerrilla* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1998); Richard Brownlee, *Grey Ghosts of the Confederacy: Guerrilla Warfare in the West, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958). For works of military history that discuss the horse in combat, see Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 27; Brent Nosworthy, *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003), 42, 280-309, 472-495; Richard Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William Still, *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 14; For a work of cultural history that look directly at the role of the horse in the war, see Paul C. Anderson, *Blood Image: Turner Ashby in the Civil War and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 17-67; Other works of cultural history that suggest the importance of the horse in vague, non-material ways are Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956); Dickson Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: University of Texas

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Press, 1979). Also see Rachel Onuf, "Thoroughbred Horses and the Rejuvenation of the Chesapeake Gentry, 1825-1835," Masters Thesis, University of Virginia, 1997.

<sup>iv</sup> 1860 United States' Federal Manuscript Census for Missouri and Virginia; *Compiled Returns of Agriculture Census*, 92, 161. The large population of horses at the state level reinforces the idea that to horse was significant to white culture in antebellum Missouri. The state had a horse population of 361,874 in 1860. The total number of white people in Missouri was 1,063,489 just before the Civil War. This created a horse to white person ratio of one to three. Virginia had substantially less horses at 287,578, while the white population was roughly the same at 1,047,299. The ratio of horse to white person in Virginia was high being a little bit more than one to four, but not as high as it was in Missouri. For further perspective, Kentucky had 355,704 horses in 1860, also less than Missouri. Regarding the county numbers, see *Agriculture of the United States in 1860, compiled from the original returns of the eighth census by Joseph C. G. Kennedy, superintendent of the census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), 88, 92, 154; Anderson, *Blood Image*, 22. For all of Anderson's thoughts on the importance of the horse in Southern Culture, see 17-67. See General Thomas Ewing's August 3, 1863 assessment of the rebellious quality of the population in his District of the Border in *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 22, Part 2, 428. In 1860, Jackson County had 6,502 horses. This number was comparable to other counties across the South better known for their horse culture. The importance of the horse in the South and southern horsemanship were reflected in the number of horses owned in a specific area. Turner Ashby, who many thought was the greatest horseman in the South, resided in Fauquier County, Virginia which had 6,721 horses in 1860. In addition to Jackson County, several other Missouri counties that were hotbeds of guerrilla warfare compare favorably with counties where the significance of the horse in antebellum culture has been more tightly woven into their history. Howard County, where Clifton Holtzclaw resided, had 6,226 horses and neighboring Chariton County had 4,962 horses in 1860. Chariton's neighbor to the south, Saline County, had 5,493 while Boone County had a whopping 9,292 horses just before the Civil War. Again, for local context, Jefferson County, the county in which Louisville is located had 5,915 and Fayette County, where Lexington is located had 8,233.

Regarding the horses owned by the guerrilla support network, that data procured from the 1860 Federal Manuscript Census, Missouri and the 1860 Federal Agriculture Census, Missouri. The Morgan Walker farm, from which Quantrill's guerrilla band originated, was home to a large stable of horses. According to the 1860 Federal Agriculture Census, Walker owned twenty five horses. This was quite a bit more than his neighbors. The average number of horses owned by households along the supply line that aided Quantrill and his men there was a little more than six horses. The Walker household had only six white members meaning there were nearly five horses for each white person. Within the average household of the Quantrill supply line this ratio was much lower, but still relatively high compared to most other households of the day. The ratio was nearly one to one as there were seven white people in each household. Walker certainly had horses to spare for horse-based guerrilla warfare and the ample number of his equine property made it possible for the guerrillas to constantly trade tired horses for fresh ones. While not nearly the size of Walker's herd, each household along the Quantrill supply line had a favorable horse to guerrilla ratio. With less than one guerrilla emerging from each household, the ratio was about six horses to every one guerrilla

<sup>v</sup> Walker, 22-23.

<sup>vi</sup> Trow, 40; *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 22, Part 1, 584.

<sup>vii</sup> *O.R.*, series 1, vol. 8, part 1, 463-464, 611-612.

<sup>viii</sup> Walker, 14-15.

<sup>ix</sup> Gregg, 10 (2<sup>nd</sup> addendum); Bailey, 43; Edwards, 15.

<sup>x</sup> Bailey, 43, 54.

<sup>xi</sup> He does not include Missouri in his study of the occupied South, but Stephen Ash offers a great description of the garrisoned towns and their purpose in Union occupation in *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 76-107.

<sup>xii</sup> For accounts of telegraph lines being cut and railroads being destroyed by guerrillas see Watts, *Babe of the Company*, 24. A Union report discussing the actions of Holtzclaw and his guerrilla band said of a particular Union outpost that "they will be very fortunate indeed if they can hold the post and keep up the military telegraph lines, which are being cut daily," in *O.R.* Series 1, Vol. 41, Part 2, 657. A similar discussion appears in *O.R.*, Series 1, Vol. 41, Part 2, 860; also see, *O.R.*, Series 1, Vol. 41, Part 2, 705; *O.R.* Series 1, Vol. 41, Part 1, 418.

<sup>xiii</sup> *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 34, Part 1, 1028.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.* One of the pro-Union citizens who was robbed by the guerrillas was the father of the future Spanish-American War and World War I general, John "Black Jack" Pershing. General Pershing got his nickname "Black

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Jack” because he led black soldiers during the Spanish-American War. There’s likely a connection between his father’s Union sentiments and his decision to lead black soldiers in the segregated United States’ army.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvii</sup> Connelley, 466-467.