

# THE NIGHT RIDERS' RAID ON HOPKINSVILLE

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"A Hot Time in the Old Town." Since the song containing these words became popular during the Spanish American War, many, in a convivial spirit and otherwise, have threatened to create just such a state of thermal intensity. But it remained for a band of from two hundred to two hundred fifty farmers to do just that in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, during the early hours of Saturday morning, December 7, 1907.

The period preceding and following this eventful date, known as the Night Rider Days, encompasses perhaps the darkest hours experienced throughout the confines of the dark tobacco belt, the Civil War Days not excepted. It was a time to try the hearts and souls of stout-hearted men; when brother was arrayed against brother and neighbor against neighbor; when lawlessness ran rampant throughout the land; when no man, whether living in town or country, felt safe; when homes were invaded, property destroyed, and lives taken in cold blood.

But to begin at the beginning. The turn of the 20th Century found the farmers of the section in a deplorable state. For the most part farming in those days was strictly raising tobacco. Diversified farming, rotation of crops, the raising of livestock, co-operative marketing, and all the other innovations now followed by the modern farmer were entirely unknown. He raised tobacco year after year and hauled it off to market, hoping to get a fair return for his labor. The tobacco market was completely dominated by the large companies who bought their needs at the lowest possible price. It was the general practice for a farmer to have his tobacco prized, and then to offer it for sale through a local warehouseman. In about 1903 the large companies withdrew from this system under pretense of doing business directly with the farmers, and started sending their buyers directly to the barns. This was followed soon after by an arrangement among the companies whereby the country was districted, and only one buyer would call on a farmer. The result was that there was no competition among the buyers, and the grower was forced to take what the buyer offered, or take his chances in selling to some of the smaller buyers or "pinhookers." Under such a system, the price continued to fall until it was real-

ized that something had to be done or the whole section would be bankrupt.

In 1903 the farmers organized a crude type of Association and endeavored to secure the agreement of all tobacco raisers to put their tobacco into the Association, where it would be sold and the proceeds distributed. The first year the sign-up was as high as 85%; but the companies had large reserve stocks, so did not rush to buy. The result was that the members received less than the non-members. As contracts were on an annual basis, it became harder and harder to secure signatures in succeeding years, and in the spring of 1906, when three year contracts were advocated, many of the leading farmers refused to sign. To add to the confusion, many who had signed would violate their contracts by selling directly to the buyers, there being no law or provision in the contracts to penalize those who did so. The result was that the Association farmer was lined up against the non-association farmer; against the member who violated his contract; against the buyers who represented the "trusts"; against the trusts and independent buyers who bought from non-member farmers, or from members who violated; and each of these factions was, in turn, arrayed against the others. Feeling became intense, meetings were held at some place in the county nearly every night in the week, and the kindling was laid for the conflagration which was to follow.

The first outbreak of lawlessness occurred in May, 1906, when the plantbeds of L. L. Leavell and J. T. Garnett, prominent non-members, were scraped and destroyed. This set the pattern. Within a few nights other beds were scraped, and the war was on. Throughout the summer and fall of 1906 numerous acts of violence of a minor nature were reported, but the tension was rising and reached its peak on the night of December 1, 1906, when a band of two hundred rode into Princeton, Kentucky; took possession of the town; and burned two stemming houses from which the flames spread to and destroyed three private residences.

Public sentiment strongly condemned the acts. The press was outspoken in condemnation, and the Association officials disclaimed any responsibility or sympathy for the lawlessness. Insurance companies began to cancel policies on tobacco. The people were soon divided into two opposing classes, those condemning such acts and those not condemning or, in some instances, justifying them. The City of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, was itself divided in sentiment, some of the people thinking it unwise to

antagonize the Association in any way. The city officials took a firm stand for law enforcement. The local company of the National Guard was kept in readiness to be called out in case of trouble, and the police force was increased to sixteen men.

During the winter of 1906 an agreement looking to peace was entered into by which tobacco crops already sold might be delivered, provided future crops were put in the Association. But such feeble efforts were futile to stay the rising tide. Letters were written and tied to gate posts ordering crops already sold to be put in the Association. Reports of hostile meetings, at which people assembled at night and organized into companies and were inflamed by incendiary speeches, came thick and fast. Night processions were frequent, with masked riders passing through the small towns and creating a state of terror among all not in sympathy. A demonstration against Hopkinsville was reported from Princeton by telephone on the night of January 4, 1907, and the local militia company assembled in the Armory and spent the night. The invasion did not come, but it was reported that a body of men had come to within twelve miles of the city and had turned back.

Throughout the year of 1907 acts of violence increased in tempo as the months passed. Hogsheads of tobacco were rolled into the river; men who refused to sign up were called out of their homes in the middle of the night and brutally beaten; some who refused to come out had their homes fired into and burned; others had dynamite planted in their wheat thrashers and the machines destroyed when they were operated. Tobacco buyers were overtaken in the country and whipped and warned that they would be killed if they continued to buy Association or non-member tobacco. On November 26 a press report sent out from Hopkinsville spoke of the apparent peace in the Dark district, and on December 2 the Executive Committee of the Christian County Association held its meeting and reported things in fine shape. It was the lull before the storm.

At 2:00 o'clock on Saturday morning, December 7, 1907, the City was invaded by an armed and masked band numbering between two hundred and two hundred fifty men. They entered the town marching in military formation, coming in over the Illinois Central railroad tracks and proceeding up Ninth Street to Main, at the corner of which they divided into six squads, according to a pre-arranged plan.

Squad No. 1 turned left at 9th and Main and proceeded north on Main to the Police office. Officers E. N. Miller, W. I. Broderick,

and Joe Claxton were on duty. Booth Morris, night chief, had gone home and Miller was in charge. Broderick and Claxton had just come in when the phone rang. It was one of the night operators at the Cumberland Telephone office calling to tell the police that the night riders were there. Officer Miller turned to cross the room to the Home phone to turn in the alarm; Claxton started for the door and was met by a band of at least 30 men, who ordered him back and began shooting at the door. The officers took refuge in the back of the building while the mob proceeded to shoot up the building. Leaving a detail on guard, the remainder marched up 6th Street to the Louisville and Nashville depot and joined the main body at 9th and Campbell streets.

Squad No. 2 went to the Cumberland Telephone office (now Southern Bell), broke open the door and eight men went up to the switchboard room and brought the night operators, Miss Annie Curtis and Miss Lillian Boyd, down to the street, where they remained in custody. When one of the men began cursing, the leader ordered him to "cut out the cursing and remember you are in the presence of ladies."

Squad No. 3 had gone on up 9th Street to the Fire Station where John Lawson, Lee Morris, Bob Tunks, Ennis Morris, John Hines, and Ernest Haydon were on duty. Haydon, being awakened by the shooting, went to the window just as a load of buck-shot warned him back. The firemen were warned that any man or horse leaving the building would be killed, after which the mob proceeded to shoot out all the windows and amused themselves by trying to shoot out the light in the town clock. Fire Chief E. H. Hester left his home and started to the station, but was taken a prisoner. He begged his captors to allow him to save the private property which had caught fire. This they refused to do until they had received the sign to assemble.

Squad No. 6 had meanwhile gone south on Main and captured the Home Telephone Company office, located on the present site of the A & P parking lot, and had then gone across the street to the old Hopson House, a famous landmark located on the southwest corner of 11th and Main streets, where the Gulf filling station now stands. The house was used at the time as a boarding house and was the residence of Lindsey Mitchell, a prominent tobacco buyer for the Imperial Tobacco Company. The raiders called for Mr. Mitchell to come out, and one account states that his wife came to the door and told them that they had a very sick child and asked them to go away. They replied by demanding him to come out and by shooting through the window. When he

came out one man told him he would not be hurt, but another said, "Yes, he will," and struck him on the head with a gun barrel several times until he had several bad cuts on his head. Another account says that they went into the house and disarmed him, just in time to keep him from shooting into their comrades. He was brought down to the street and beaten, the captain of the squad looking on until he decided that he had had enough—when he stopped the beating and escorted Mitchell back to his door. This same group also proceeded to demolish the office of the *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, a newspaper published by Mayor Charles M. Meacham in the building now occupied by the Cayce Gift Shop. In his official capacity as mayor, and through the columns of his newspaper, he had been outspoken in denouncing the Night Riders, and had warned them that a "warm reception" awaited them if they ever came to Hopkinsville. In connection with Mayor Meacham there occurred an incident which has been repeated with great humor through the years. His honor the mayor, being awakened by the noise of the firing, got up, dressed, and started to town regardless of the fact that he had been warned by the Night Riders that when they visited Hopkinsville they would also pay a call on him. Whether the group that he met near 14th & Main streets was on its way to call upon him or not will never be known. However, he decided against meeting them face to face, so took refuge in the vestibule of the First Baptist Church, where he stayed until all danger had passed. This gave rise to the saying which is current to this day, that the Baptist Church has shown that it can save a man, for look what it did for Charlie Meacham!

Details from all these squads, having accomplished their first objective, had hurried to strategic points about the city and, as the aroused citizens came from their homes, promptly took them prisoners and held them until the signal was given that the raid was over. A corral was established at the intersection of 9th and Liberty streets, and all citizens reaching the downtown section were held there.

As the various groups went through the streets a continuous fusillade of firing, designed to terrorize, kept all but the bravest within doors. But even this was not enough, for at every residence or business house where a light was seen a hail of lead was immediately directed. For weeks the town was filled with tales of bullets flying into sick rooms, and of the wanton destruction of private property in no way connected with the tobacco situation. The wonder of it all was that only one person, a colored

woman living on the bluff overlooking the I. C. railroad yards, was injured, and she not fatally. There was only one other casualty, J. C. Felts, an L. & N. switchman, was purposely shot by a raider when he attempted, against orders, to move some box cars from the siding between the L. & N. depot and the Latham warehouse. But all these things were preliminary to their objective.

The main body, Squads 4 and 5, had gone up Ninth Street across the L. & N. railroad to the warehouse of M. H. Tandy & Company, owned by John C. Latham of New York, and located on the eastern half of what is now Peace Park. They quickly beat down the door and, with the aid of a liberal application of coal oil, soon had the building afire. They next marched up Campbell to 14th Street, where the same treatment was administered to the Tandy and Fairleigh warehouse, which was the local buyer for the Italian government. Both buildings and their contents were totally destroyed. Flames from the Tandy warehouse spread to the building of R. M. Wooldridge, an Association warehouse situated on the western half of Peace Park site, and practically destroyed this building and its contents. The incendiary work having been done, the main body reformed in military order, marched across 17th Street to Virginia, down Virginia to 14th, thence to Water (now Bethel) and on to 9th and Water streets.

At about 3:30 a signal was given by gunfire and at once all the other squads assembled at 9th and Main. After a roll call by squads and by number, they marched out of town in the glare of the burning buildings by the route by which they had entered, singing "The Sun Shines Bright in My Old Kentucky Home."

The raid was over. The town that had boasted what it would do had been surprised and taken with ease. Property to the extent estimated at from \$50,000 to \$200,000 had been destroyed. But one of the most exciting episodes was yet to occur.

At the first alarm Major E. B. Bassett, later Colonel, left his home at 9th and Coleman streets, just two blocks from the Latham warehouse, and made his way through side streets to the Company D Armory in the Moayon Building at 9th and Virginia. Several other members of the guard company reached there soon after the raid was over. Major Bassett, Mayor Meacham, and the sheriff held a hurried conference and agreed that they should not let the blow go unanswered, and that a pursuit posse should be organized. Men were not readily available for such a posse, however, and more than an hour passed before the posse (com-

posed of five soldiers, Lt. Stanley Bassett, Sgt. Bernice Gooch, Sgt. Riley Butler, Pvts. John C. Lawson and E. W. Clark; four citizen volunteers, John Stites, R. M. Fairleigh, Edgar Elgin, and Charles M. Meacham, Jr.; and Deputy Sheriff Lucien Cravens, with Major Bassett in comand) headed out West 7th Street. Six were on horseback and five were in a two-horse "carry-all." They attempted to head off the raiders at the railroad crossing two miles from town, but got there a few minutes too late. The posse followed them for several miles, with the carry-all staying behind and the horsemen gradually catching up. The raiders, having no fear of being followed and considering the horsemen as part of their party, allowed them to ride into their midst and along with them. Major Bassett said they were in a fine humor, talking and laughing over the raid and considering their job well done. He led his party on through the ranks, hoping to overtake and capture their leader. Not finding him, they turned into a side road to await the coming of the five in the carry-all and to continue the pursuit together. When the raiders divided at the forks of the road that went to Wallonia, the posse followed the group going toward Cadiz with the idea of giving battle. They soon overtook the rear of the column, and Major Bassett, riding up to a surrey carrying four or five, reached in and grabbed one of the occupants by the hair and pulled him out. In the fighting that followed, George Gray, of the Blue Springs section of Trigg County, was killed and Clancy McCool was badly wounded. Other raiders, hearing the firing, came back to the aid of their comrades and a pitched battle followed. The posse retreated toward Hopkinsville without injury and, although it was never proven, the statement was widely published and is current to this day that there were at least two secret funerals in the Night Rider country a few days thereafter.

But Major Bassett and his posse were not the only heroes of the night. In the *Kentucky New Era* of December 8, 1907, we find the following, which we quote:

### ONE MAN ONLY RESISTS

While the mob was at police headquarters, Joe McCarroll, Jr. stepped from his house at 2nd and Main streets, and fired ten times at the Night Riders with a repeating rifle. They returned the fire, and McCarroll quickly retreated into the house.

It was only natural that the story of the raid and of the chase of the raiders by the posse would be big news all over the

country. Reporters and special writers from many big city papers and magazines visited Hopkinsville, and some of them wrote articles overdrawn and exaggerated in the extreme. All played up the heroism of Major Bassett, and his picture appeared in the Louisville, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and many other papers. Artists pictured the riders in Ku-Klux regalia in scenes littered with the bodies of fallen men. The most ludicrous story appeared in the February 8, 1908, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, a publication of nation-wide fame which depicted "the spectacle of fellow-Kentuckians, perhaps neighbors, shooting at each other with deadly intent, was painted red by the flames of the burning warehouses; shrieks of terror-stricken women were heard above the rattle of shots, and the cries of the wounded answered the shouts of new recruits to the ranks of the defenders. Slowly fighting each step of retreat, the Night Riders were forced from street to street and alley to alley and finally to the outskirts of the city." The article carried a picture of the ruins of the Tandy and Fairleigh warehouse and explained: "In the rear are the ruins of Acme Mills and Elevator Company [a flour mill] which had a daily capacity of 1200 hogsheads of tobacco."

Interesting sidelights on the Hopkinsville raid are contained in the excellent history compiled by Dr. James O. Nall of Clay, Kentucky, *The Tobacco Night Riders of Kentucky and Tennessee, 1905-1909*, published in 1939. The incidents which he portrays were not given in any of the newspaper reports of the period, and evidently were gleaned by him from the testimony in the various court proceedings which concluded the Night Rider days. Because of their interest, I quote from his book as follows (pp. 74-77):

"... a raid on Hopkinsville was definitely contemplated by the Night Rider leaders in October, 1907, but local men familiar with the situation opposed it until they could make their organization still more complete. So it was deferred, but a date was set—November 19, 1907; and on that night, Night Riders from Calloway, Lyon, Caldwell, Trigg and (West) Christian counties assembled eleven miles from Hopkinsville, just west of Gracey, preparatory to 'riding' on the city. Telephone wires were cut, but not until after the news of the Night Rider gathering had reached the city. A raid was again anticipated, and again extra policemen were put on duty, Company D was assembled, and a hundred or more citizens were notified to be ready.

"The Riders turned back. A stiff wind, which had started blowing with nightfall and had developed into a gale, was given

as an excuse by the leaders. They said they had no reason to burn all of Hopkinsville, and that if they set fire to the factories in such a wind it would be impossible to control it. That was true, *but they turned back because they received word that the city was ready to defend itself and they had better not come in. . .*

"The Hopkinsville raid occurred two and one-half weeks later, on December 6-7, 1907. By that time, enough citizens in and around the city had joined the Night Riders to so control the situation locally to make the raid effective. There was no opposition. The citizens who had formerly been on hand with their guns were at home; the members of Company D were conspicuous by their absence; there were no extra policemen on duty. . .

"During the afternoon, a Night Rider spy from Wallonia rode into Hopkinsville, contacted local Riders and gave them definite assurance that the raid would be made as planned. He was told, 'Come on. Everything's ready.' Meanwhile, Riders were on the road to Wallonia from Eddyville and Princeton, and other parts of Lyon and Caldwell counties. They met there, shortly after dark, with the local Riders, the lieutenant commander and the General, who gave these squads and their leaders instructions as to their particular duties. These directions consumed an hour, after which a minister is said to have prayed that the raid would be successful without bloodshed. The Riders then started toward Gracey. The majority were on horseback. A few were in buggies. The roads were good—winter weather had not yet set in—and they made good time.

"During the same hours, Riders from Calloway county and the western and southern parts of Trigg county rode toward Cadiz where they joined a local contingent and passed on to meet with the Wallonia squads at the road junction just west of Gracey. The combined force continued through that community toward Hopkinsville. They rode quietly, being joined by parties from Roaring Springs and points in West Christian from time to time. At a point about two miles west of Hopkinsville, where the Cadiz road then crossed the I. C. Railroad, the Wallonia spy met the Riders and told the General that the 'road was open,' that he had but to march in and raid the city. About fifty local recruits joined the party at that place.

"The Riders hitched their horses, and fed them to prepare for the long trip back, except for about 25 horsemen who rode on toward the city to enter and patrol it as general protectors of the main raiding party. About 25 men were left in charge of the horses, the other 250 forming in line along the railroad to adjust

their sleeve badges, get their masks ready, and review their orders with their leaders. According to Milton Oliver and Arthur Cooper, final instructions were given in person by Dr. Amoss. The Riders then began their march into the city. . . . In the meantime, unrecognized Night Riders from various places in Christian county had entered the city to be on hand to join the main body. Some came on trains; some on horseback and in buggies, putting up at the livery stables and boarding houses; some stopped with friends, while others killed time in saloons and hotel lobbies. About 11:00 P.M., fifteen Riders hitched their horses on the Greenville road, met nine others from within Hopkinsville and patrolled the L. & N. Railroad until the raid began. Small groups gathered at various places in the city—one on West Seventh street about 11:00 P.M., and another near the Imperial [Tobacco] factory about the same time."

In addition to the wounding of the colored woman and the L. & N. brakeman, Dr. Nall states that there was one other casualty, that of Dr. David Amoss, of Cobb, Kentucky, the alleged commander in chief of the Night Riders, and the brains of the organization. He says:

" . . . the next, and most important, casualty was Dr. Amoss himself who was struck in the head by some glancing gunshot while directing the activities near the L. & N. depot. He sustained three wounds in the scalp, one starting a minor but persistent hemorrhage. According to Arthur Cooper, he said, 'I am shot, but I am not shot bad.' He then released command to Colonel Dunning and took charge of a passing livery stable rig in which he drove west on Ninth street to await assembly. . . ." (p. 78)

"Dr. Amoss left the city in the livery stable rig, driving out West Seventh street to the railroad crossing. The troublesome wound continued to bleed, but he remained at the hitching place until the Riders reached their horses. Seeing that his men were safe, and *cautioning them to maintain an alert rear guard in event of pursuit*, he then took stock of himself. A small artery had been severed and a compress was not sufficient to control the hemorrhage. Unable to ligate the artery himself and not daring to return to Hopkinsville for medical attention, he drove fifteen miles to Wallonia (as fast as the 'borrowed' horse could take him) where a young physician closed the artery with a suture-ligature. It was not considered a serious wound, but, under the circumstances, it is probable that he saved the General's life." (p. 79)

"The horse and buggy, which Dr. Amoss had appropriated, were returned that evening by an unknown driver and left in Little River near the Seventh street bridge. The owner 'found' them there about 7:00 P.M. The rig was being driven by Ben Decker, Negro, when the General hailed it, and he drove it on out of the city. He was put out a half-mile from the city limits and told to run; and, as he commented on it later, 'I did, suh.' Dr. Amoss was up and about as usual during the day, but he visited his patients with a cap pulled down close to his ears to hide his wounds. The rumor was out that he had been killed. The community understood that he had a 'severe headache.'" (p. 82)

This story clears up the mysterious commandeering of a horse and buggy from Gray and Gates stable, located where the Coca-Cola Bottling Company now stands, and the equally mysterious finding of the horse and buggy tied to a post at the Fifth Street ford across Little River behind the city jail on Sunday morning following the raid on Saturday.

The days following were hectic ones as the rumor persisted that the Night Riders planned to return in force and wipe Hopkinsville off the map in retaliation for the action of the Bassett posse. Company D, the local National Guard Company, was ordered on duty and patrolled the city twenty-four hours a day. They were later relieved by Company H of Louisville, also the troops were re-inforced by a Gatling gun, which was set up on the sidewalk in front of the court house. The Louisville Company was composed principally of untrained boys of 18 and 19 years of age, and they contributed very little to the stability of the community. They were young, badly scared, and made it their policy to shoot first and look afterwards. At least one person was severely injured by their promiscuous shooting. They were later relieved by a company from Eastern Kentucky. These were men of mature age, excellent soldiers, but it was said that they were Night Riders of a different sort. To supplement the National Guard troops a "Law and Order League" was formed with a civilian guard unit, which was sworn to defend the town against all invaders. Night after night the citizens assembled, were issued regulation military rifles, and walked guard all night. A story was told of Mr. Ira L. Smith and Rev. George C. Abbott, both of sainted memory, standing guard all one bitter cold night, armed with Springfield rifles, but without any shells. By degrees the tension subsided as the tide of violence moved into Trigg, Lyon and Caldwell counties.

The first break in the Night Riders' ranks came with the con-

fession of Sanford Hall, Milt Oliver, and others, who gave away all the secrets of the organization. Numerous attempts were made to kill these traitors to the organization, and they would have been killed had not the Governor placed a military guard at the home of each for protection. Various reasons for their betrayal were advanced, but at this late date it is generally conceded that the State paid them to do so and promised them protection. It was largely upon evidence of these men that suits in Federal Court in Paducah, Kentucky, brought by persons who sustained damages against those whom they claimed had participated, resulted in verdicts for damages against the individual members, which made Night Riding very unpopular.

The final chapter of the Night Riding days, insofar as Hopkinsville was concerned, occurred in the indictment and trial of Dr. David Amoss on charge of "willfully and feloniously confederating, conspiring, and banding together for the purpose of molesting, injuring, and destroying the property of other persons." It was an imposing legal battle. The late Judge Jack Hanberry presided. Attorneys for the prosecution were: Commonwealth Attorney Denny P. Smith of Cadiz, J. C. Sims of Bowling Green, S. Y. Trimble, Douglas Bell, and County Attorney John C. Duffy, of Hopkinsville; for the defense: C. H. Bush, Thomas P. Cook, and W. T. Fowler, of Hopkinsville, John W. Kelly of Cadiz, and S. T. Hodge of Princeton. The trial began on March 6, 1911, and ran for ten days. All the so-called state evidence witnesses testified that they were members of the organization, and most participated in the Hopkinsville raid. But it all went for naught when Judge Hanberry instructed the jury:

"If the jury believes that Dr. Amoss entered the conspiracy to destroy the warehouse of John C. Latham, and did carry out this object, you should find him guilty. But you cannot convict him on the unsupported testimony of accomplices."

The jury took one ballot and turned in a verdict of "Not Guilty."

The era of the Night Riders was over. Although they failed as a militant order, they attracted the nation's attention to the conditions which they fought, and it remained for the Supreme Court of the United States to accomplish in a large measure what they had failed to accomplish. In October, 1910, that Court ruled that the American Tobacco Company, as then organized, was a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and ordered its dissolution. In retrospect it is easy to visualize the Night Riders

engrossed in their activities, for many men are still living who resorted to the match, mask, and gun in their fight for the tobacco-grower who could not fight alone. They staged a revolt for a just cause. War is war whether on the battlefield or the tobacco field, and so it was in Kentucky and Tennessee in 1906-07-08.

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