

The History of A Country, A County... Divided

by Ken Draper

The Cornstalk Fight - Oct, 1861

The people in the southern part of the county were largely Confederate in sentiment and men from there enlisted early in the Confederate army. In October, 1861, a number of Confederate recruits were in camp on the east fork of the Crooked River in the southwest corner of what is now Lincoln Township. Major James, then with his battalion of Union militia at Cameron, resolved to break up this recruiting camp of "rebels." He set out with 150 men and sent Lieutenant Plumb ahead with a scouting party.

Kingston, the county seat, was also the location of most of the county moneys, both private and public. The funds were kept in the courthouse safe as there were no banks at that time. The Confederate guerillas were watching it closely when they learned of Major James' approach with the militia. The guerrillas tried burning the covered bridge on the Hamilton-Kingston Road by smearing it with oil, but before it could burn very much, Lt. Plumb arrived and engaged the rebels. When Major James arrived with the rest of his battalion, the rebels retreated east. The Union troops put out the fire and saved the bridge while Lt. Plumb pursued the rebels to a cornfield. Confederates, who were hiding in the cornfield, ambushed the Union troops. Major Plumb's battalion attacked in force and the rebels retreated.

Thraikill-Taylor Raid - July, 1864

The major event of the war in Caldwell County was the raid made in July, 1864, by 300 Confederates under the leadership of Major John Thraikill and Charles F. "Fletch" Taylor. The Unionists claimed that the objective of the raid was to obtain plunder and recruits, and to punish the Pro-Union residents of the county. Actually, this raid was part of a larger raid in Clay, Ray, and Clinton counties. Thraikill was in regular Confederate service, while Taylor had been under guerilla leader William Quantrell. Coming up through Ray County on July 19, 1864, they held up the Lexington-Hamilton stagecoach at Knoxville, destroyed mail and took the horses. Crossing into Lincoln Township in Caldwell County, they captured a company of Union militia who had gathered to oppose their advance. Not having a way to deal with prisoners, and before the Black Flag policy of executing all prisoners, they paroled them all and started on the Kingston Road.

In the meantime, hearing of the entry of Thraikill in the county, S. P. Cox, then in charge of the Union militia, ordered all troops to Black Oak -- in the south part of the county -- to stop Thraikill. Lieutenant J. H. Snyder immediately started with all of the men he could arm, leaving Kingston without defense. Cox and his men were too slow. Thraikill went around them and on into Kingston about 4:00 in the afternoon on July 20. Hearing of the approach of the raiders, there was a general stampede of the male population of Kingston to get out of town.

While claiming to be Confederate troops, they were really guerillas, going from place to place, plundering and killing men belonging to the Pro-Union militia. The raiders broke into the courthouse safe and took about \$8,000 of county and private funds. Pickets were posted on all roads. Two men mounted the cupola of the courthouse to take down the Union flag when Miss Olivia George ordered the men not to touch the flag. The men paid no attention to her except to compliment her on her spunk and tore it down and took it with them. All Union flags were torn from business places. Military papers were burned. Stores, except that of John Ardinger, a Southerner, were robbed of food, clothing, and liquor.

After an hour and before dark, the raiders proceeded to Mirabile where they again plundered stores and a few homes. The militia reformed and pursued the raiders. Two of Thraikill's band loitered there when the raiders moved on west and were captured on the Mirabile Road a few miles northwest of Mirabile by a squad of militia under Captain Crouse. The captured raiders were "Stump" Breckenridge and Richard Lancaster, both of Platte County. Both admitted being with Thraikill but declared that they had enlisted in the regular Confederate service and had deserted their command when it turned back in Carroll County after finding it impossible to cross the Missouri River. The two said that they had intended to return home and to surrender to their home militia, with whom they were well acquainted and by whom they expected to be well treated. But they had a coat belonging to Union Captain Abraham Allen of Elkhorn in Ray County, which was condemning enough.

The prisoners were guarded in Mirabile until the following night when Captain Crouse and 15 men started them ostensibly for Kingston, but instead went west. Two miles from Mirabile, on Union Captain E. D. Johnson's farm near the Plattsburg Road and 200 yards southwest of the Morris Cemetery, the two were executed. Official reports show they were shot on a bit of open prairie near the timber. It was reported that Breckenridge, when he saw the preparations being made to kill him, said to the militia, "If I'd have known you intended killing me you never would have taken me alive." It required several shots to finish the prisoners, owing to the darkness. The bodies were left there on the ground and the militia returned to Kingston.

The next day, they were buried by Captain Johnson, Bro. Mumpower, Criss Kerr, and perhaps others in the Morris Cemetery, which is four miles west of Kingston in unmarked graves. Eight miles west of Mirabile, the militia overtook the raiders and a battle ensued, routing the militia. The raiders returned to Mirabile. When Thraikill and Taylor reached Mirabile, they learned of the killings of Breckenridge and Lancaster. Some of the raiders from Platte County were especially enraged. About a dozen prisoners were gathered up, among whom were J. D. Cox, Aaron Pfost, James Ray, Rev. Tunnage and his two sons, and a Mr. Cates. Fletch Taylor swore he would kill old man Pfost and another prisoner, who it is said were present and aided in the killing of the two prisoners the night before. When Major Cox realized that Thraikill had evaded him, he set out in pursuit, overtaking the raiders at Camden Point in Platte County where the engagement ended in a decisive victory for the Union. The Confederates were routed with 9 killed and 16 injured and Union losses were 2 injured, none killed. The 2nd Colorado Cavalry took river boats from Kansas City to Weston, and then rode to Camden Point to end Confederate recruiting efforts and to punish Confederate sympathizers in Platte County.

The war in Caldwell County came home to leave its bloody wrath and smell of death on the doorsteps of this otherwise quiet rural community. There was no more allowance for neutrality; it was one side or the other to the end. The difference in the vigilance between the events of 1861 and 1864 illustrates the increased desperation being felt by both sides and the change in attitudes about prisoners. This tit for tat became the Black Flag policy of both sides which encouraged executing all prisoners, and, by 1864, made Missouri the most ruthless turf of the war.