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Incident at the Otterville Station



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Incident at the Otterville Station

A Civil War Story of Slavery and Rescue



JOHN CHRISTGAU

*University of Nebraska Press
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CHAPTER 1

The Great Emancipator



The grandest ball in the history of this country was held on an unusually warm Thursday night in November of 1863 in New York City. Following some of the heaviest fighting of the Civil War, thousands of guests promenaded into the Great Russian Ball along a narrow walkway of magenta carpet at the New York Academy of Music. Bronze statues holding lighted torches flanked the entry doors to the dance floor. White tapestries and baskets with braided ropes of bright flowers hung along the walls.

On the huge dance floor, what was described as a mass of humanity heaved and flowed. Dancers struggled to find room to step and whirl. There were waltzes and quadrilles and polkas. Actors, empresses, soldiers, writers, statesmen, beautiful young women in magnificent dresses garished with pomegranate blossoms and sparkling dew drop diamonds looped and glided and bumped. The ballroom smelled of thick perfumes and forget-me-nots. The music of Rossini and Verdi and Schubert glided above the steady hum of the cheerful voices of the dancers.

Two and a half years had passed since Confederate forces had fired on Fort Sumter in April of 1861 and set off a bloody Civil War. The war would be a brief one, President Lincoln thought, to put down a Southern rebellion. Some insisted the war was about preserving the Union while

others claimed it was over the issue of slavery. “If slavery is not wrong,” Lincoln said, “nothing is wrong.”

Whatever the causes, Lincoln had called for the formation of a militia to put down the rebellion. Ninety thousand men signed up as three-month volunteers. But after the rebel victory in July of 1861 at the First Battle of Bull Run, it was obvious that there would be no quick end to the war.

A critical Union victory in September of 1862 at Antietam, Maryland, restored Union hopes. Dead soldiers from both the Union and Confederate armies lay scattered and heaped along the rail fences of the battlefield, but Northern newspapers wrote, “At no time have the hopes of the nation been so close to realization.”

Two months later, in what was described as a “strange and terrible” battle at Fredericksburg, Virginia, the rebels proved too much for Union forces. During the battle, Union soldiers made their way forward through the bodies of their fallen comrades, spaced in death with the order of railroad ties. One Union soldier wrote that it was “a masterly piece of butchery . . . with not a thing accomplished.” Northerners were outraged, and the Union’s hope for victory sank again.

After a week of bloody battle in May of 1863, at a crossroads in Virginia called Chancellorsville, Union forces suffered nearly twenty thousand casualties. It was more senseless butchery with nothing resolved. But two months later, Northern spirits soared again after Union forces at Gettysburg rained cannon balls and bullets from the high ground of Cemetery Ridge on rebel forces marching with fixed bayonets through bucolic wheat fields and peach orchards and a valley of death sprinkled with wildflowers.

The Union victory at Gettysburg was still a cause for celebration when those revelers and exhausted dancers

in New York City sat down late at night to consume a seven course banquet featuring half a ton of beef and a thousand ducklings prepared as *canetons a la rouennaise*. Then a thousand champagne corks exploded like the gunfire in a war that was still raging, and a toast was proposed to “Abraham Lincoln the Great Emancipator.”

The dancers had hardly recovered from the gala event when, a thousand miles across the country, a Missouri slave owner named Charles W. Walker in Pettis County gathered his thirteen sleepy slaves in the middle of the night in front of their cabin. The cold air held no trace of the intoxicating perfumes of dancers. The squawks of roosters replaced the strains of Strauss and Verdi. There were no bright lights or sparkling diamonds, no pomegranate blossoms. Instead of the savory aroma of roast ducklings, there was only the sharp smell of fried fatback and barnyard manure. Instead of a thousand cheerful voices, there was only the lone, flat voice of Master Walker as he addressed his assembled slaves of six adults and seven small children.

He had awakened them early, he wanted them to know, because he was shipping them by train that morning to Kentucky, where they were to be sold on the slave market in Louisville.

The thirteen slaves were stunned. Walker often worked the fields of his farm beside his slaves. He had always been kindly and sociable. Meanwhile, Missouri was surrounded by free territory that invited runaways. Walker knew as well as anyone that cruelty to slaves only increased the possibility of flight.

That flight had been going on for decades. Tens of thousands of slaves had fled to Canada by virtue of the underground railroad, which seems to suggest escaping like burrowing moles. But the “railroad” was neither subter-

ranee nor confined to tracks, instead following along secret trails from one safe house to another. The runaway slaves slept in barns by day and traveled mostly by foot or wagon at night, until they reached Canada. In an effort to discourage the flight, slave owners warned that escape to Yankee safety would mean neglect and abuse. Or they warned that the fugitives were a threat to Yankee peace and order. But how could penniless Negroes armed with nothing but corn cutters and clubs threaten anybody?

Predictions of slaves making war against the Yankees and warnings by slave owners of Yankee cruelty did not discourage flight. Once the Civil War began, the chaos of battle presented opportunities for escape to nearby Union lines. Among slaves, word of mouth about the possibility of escape to the Union lines encouraged still more flights to freedom. On the East Coast, fleeing slaves commandeered rowboats and barges, then made their way across bays and inlets and along creeks and narrows to find refuge on Union naval vessels. Slave owners complained of the slaves' "stampede to the enemy." The inland was crisscrossed with runaway trails. Meanwhile, in the months before Charles Walker faced his slaves in the barnyard dark, slave owners like him had sent a thousand slaves to be sold in the slave auctions of Kentucky.

Standing before his slaves, Walker did not bother to explain how the national controversy over slavery was threatening his way of life in Missouri. While mighty forces of the split nation clashed at dirt crossroads at Chancellorsville and in wheat fields at Gettysburg, Missouri became a battle ground on a smaller scale for those same forces, at places like Boonville and Wilson's Creek.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was meant to be national legislation that would settle the issue of whether new states would be admitted to the Union as free or slave. Missouri was eventually admitted as a slave state,

but the quarrel over the fate of new states did not disappear. Now those same forces that whipsawed the North and the South between hopes for glorious victory and despair over senseless butchery had split Missouri into bitter factions. However, there was no clear line separating the two factions. On the farms and in the villages and cities within the state, families split and neighbor fought against neighbor over the issues of secession and slavery.

The fight between the two warring factions in Missouri was every bit as passionate and often bloody as the clashes on the battlefields of Fredericksburg and Antietam. Even before the fighting started in the East, Missouri's governor Claiborne Jackson, who spoke of Missouri's "sisterhood" with slave states, organized the various militias of the state into a Missouri state guard that would serve as a military arm for those Missouri citizens who favored the preservation of slavery and secession from the Union. "Throw off the yoke of the North," one of the commanders urged.

Early in 1861 a state convention of politicians rejected the idea of secession. Their decision wasn't solely an expression of antislavery sentiments. Much of Missouri's commerce and grain trade depended on eastern markets. Secession would deprive Missouri of those markets and end the state's control of the Missouri and Mississippi River corridors along which that trade moved. Seceding from the Union would be tantamount to an act of self-destruction.

After the firing on Fort Sumter, President Lincoln's call for 75,000 militia men created outrage in parts of Missouri. Governor Jackson and ardent rebel sympathizers refused the call from the Union for Missouri militiamen to help put down the Southern rebellion. The move appeared to favor the Confederacy and slaveholding in Missouri. But over the preceding decades, the character of

the state had changed. There had been an explosion of white immigrants. The immigrants, many of whom were Germans who objected to slavery, were emerging as a new political force. The influence of those who felt that slavery was an economic necessity and a cultural way of life was declining.

Missouri politicians and others, including abolitionists, offered to create a “Home Guard” militia that would accept rather than reject the federal government’s call to arms. Meanwhile, Governor Jackson met secretly with secessionists to lay plans for a force drawn from various militia units in the state to seize the federal arsenal in St. Louis. Confederate states offered to send troops to help carry out Jackson’s plan.

The plan failed when Union troops surrounded what was called “Camp Jackson” and placed Jackson and his men under arrest. Riots in St. Louis over federal intervention and the arrest of Jackson’s men created still deeper division within the state. Jackson called for fifty thousand young Missouri men to take up arms against the tyranny of the United States.

Just when it appeared that the secessionists would prevail in Missouri, Jackson was forced to flee the state capitol at Jefferson City and form a government in exile in Boonville, Missouri. Jackson’s government had no territory to administer and few civic duties to carry out. The Union forces in Missouri took heart again and declared that Jackson had expatriated himself. A provisional state government was hastily formed in Jefferson City. Delegates to another state convention elected Hamilton Gamble as provisional governor. If Unionists expected the new governor to make the threat of rebellion disappear, they were quickly disappointed. It is “utterly impossible that any one man can pacify the troubled waters of the state,” Gamble said at his inauguration.

In efforts to keep the peace, one of the Union's first military skirmishes was a brief fight against Jackson's newly formed state guard defending his government in exile in Boonville. Jackson and his troops were quickly routed, and Jackson headed for his second exile, this time in southwestern Missouri.

The pendulum had swung back in favor of the Union again. With Jackson in exile and his state guard forces defeated, pro-Confederates in central Missouri who were eager to fight had two choices: leave the state or join various guerilla organizations. Many chose the latter, and guerilla insurgents adopted hit-and-run tactics, harassing Union troops, burning bridges, and attacking supply trains. These attacks meant that train engines had to be fitted with bulletproof iron plates. Boxcar doors were removed so that Union troops could quickly jump out and shoot.

The guerillas, or "bushwhackers," so named because they whacked their way through thick bushes and heavy woods with machetes, were a haphazard but pesky enemy that saw itself as a critical force in the fight to resist Missouri Unionists. President Lincoln appointed General John Fremont to lead federal forces in northern Missouri against the bushwhackers. Lincoln promised Fremont all the military resources he would need to clear the state of guerillas and rebels. Once again, rebel sympathizers in Missouri seemed to be on the run.

But General Fremont's first Draconian moves in Missouri were to declare that all slaves of masters disloyal to the Union were free. He imposed martial law first on St. Louis, then on the entire state. The dramatic action created an outcry from the state's slaveholders and citizens. Jackson's government in exile quickly passed an ordinance calling for secession. Meanwhile, radical Missouri abolitionists cheered Fremont's dramatic approach.

Lincoln hoped to keep Missouri and the loyal border states of Kentucky, Delaware, and Maryland in the Union. Those states all clung to the institution of slavery, and their attachment to the Union was precarious. Provoking a confrontation with any of them over the issue of slavery might turn them against the Union and drive them into the Confederacy. That eventuality would undermine the Union and give the Confederacy more manpower and resources to fight the war.

Taking a position that he hoped struck a middle ground between abolition and secession, Lincoln argued for a gradual and less antagonistic approach in loyal border states. His idea was that the owners of slaves could be persuaded to give up slavery if they were *compensated* for the release of their slaves. Now General Fremont's actions in Missouri, freeing all slaves of owners who were disloyal to the Union, were abrupt and provocative. As 1861 ended, Lincoln countermanded Fremont's order and relieved him of his command. The general's military career in Missouri had lasted just one hundred days.

Despite 52,000 new federal troops in Missouri, the guerillas refused to go away, particularly in seven counties along the Missouri River valley in a region called Little Dixie. The farmers there were mostly migrants from Virginia and Kentucky who in the decades prior to the Civil War had settled the region because the land was cheap and the Missouri bottomlands were fertile. Tobacco crops and particularly the backbreaking labor of hemp production meant that over a third of the region's inhabitants were slaves who were the backbone of the state's slave labor. Although the slaveholders were farmers with only half as many slaves per household as the plantations of the Deep South, they and the citizens of Little Dixie considered themselves Southern, and many harbored seces-

sion sentiments. Meanwhile, the area had a long history of militancy; and with the start of the Civil War and Lincoln's call for troops, Little Dixie became a hotbed of anti-Union sentiment. The area was the perfect breeding ground for the insurrection that led to guerilla warfare in every corner of Little Dixie not long after the start of the war.

Who were these outlaws who were blowing up railroad bridges and terrifying the citizens into abandoning farms with crops rotting in the fields? They were "white trash," their opponents insisted. They were nothing but outlaws, bandits, and horse thieves. They were cowardly and wolf-like. They scalped Union soldiers. They were pirates, gangsters, murderers, and robbers who glorified terror. Their ranks included some of the most psychopathic killers and bandits in U.S. history, among them the Younger brothers and Frank James. They were enemies of Christianity who were without principle. Finally, they were worthless in true battle.

In fact, they were not as trashy and villainous as their opponents insisted. They came mainly from farms and villages. They may have sympathized with the South, but most had been born in Missouri. They were typically the eldest sons of wealthy farm families who owned numerous slaves. As the eldest sons, likely to inherit the wealth and property of their parents, they stood to lose more than anyone else if slavery was abolished in Missouri. In the minds of their supporters, they were noble and heroic figures who had risen to protect their families against savage aliens from the North.

However heroic the guerillas appeared to some, Union armies insisted they were not entitled to treatment as noble warriors, and in April of 1863 a German American jurist named Francis Lieber drew up a code of conduct that dictated how Union soldiers should behave in the

field. Lieber's code, eventually signed by President Lincoln, characterized guerillas as brigands who committed ambush, devastation, rapine, robbery, and destruction. If caught on the battlefield, they could be summarily executed. Furthermore, the code argued that all men were equal and slavery existed only through municipal law. According to Lieber's code, slaves who fled their masters were free men and their masters had no right to claim them.

Lieber's code did little to change guerilla hit-and-run tactics. They struck quickly and unexpectedly, then disappeared into the Missouri woods. They continued to attack Union encampments and supply trains. They threatened the wives of Union supporters, they ransacked and burned homes, they stole food. Thousands of Union troops assigned to protect bridges and supply lines and telegraph lines were tied down in Missouri when they could have been used elsewhere.

The worst of the guerillas, or the most ingenious, some argued, was William Clarke Quantrill, the twenty-four-year-old ex-schoolteacher who seemed to be able to operate on the Missouri-Kansas border with impunity. At dawn on August 21, 1863, he led five hundred men fifty miles across the border into Kansas, where they made a surprise attack on Lawrence, Kansas, a base of operations for abolitionists. On the streets or in front of their families in their homes, 150 men and boys from the town were shot. After Quantrill and his men set fire to most of the town, they fled back into Missouri.

The cry in Kansas for vengeance was immediate. But Quantrill and his men had disappeared into the thick Missouri woods. There was little that could be done to him directly. But Union commanders were convinced that the guerilla bands could survive only with the assistance and forage provided by Confederate sympathizers

in Missouri; and just four days after Quantrill's raid on Lawrence, Union General Thomas Ewing ordered the evacuation of four rural counties along the Kansas-Missouri border where the guerillas were wreaking havoc. Ewing's General Order no. 11, with President Lincoln's approval, was meant to deprive the guerillas of their material support, but the four counties became a no-man's-land where the raiders enjoyed even greater freedom to forage for food and supplies.

Meanwhile, Confederate forces had been making periodic forays into Missouri since the start of the war, hoping to recruit rebel soldiers, draw Union troops away from other battles, and bring Missouri into the Confederacy. However, rebel commanders complained to their superiors that they needed more troops to prevail in Missouri. Eventually, rebel forces that might have brought Missouri into the Confederacy and preserved slavery were routed.

For Charles Walker in Pettis County, that no-man's-land along the Missouri-Kansas border was too close to home. The hit-and-run tactics of the guerillas, however heroic, had been counterproductive. Radical abolitionist sentiments in Missouri had only grown stronger. Those radicals became so confident of their cause that they held an abolition convention. It was clear to Walker that the institution of slavery in Missouri was doomed.

In the predawn dark, he announced his intention to ship his slaves to one of the slave marts in Kentucky and sell them. His authorization to do so, he said, would come from the Union forces in Sedalia. For the thirteen slaves gathered in the dark, it meant that Abraham Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator who would ultimately control their fate and was being toasted in the ballrooms of New York. Their fate was in the immediate hands of their master, Charles W. Walker.