

150 Years: Remembering Worst Civil War Battle on Missouri Soil

Over the next few weeks, the Shelby County Herald will be remembering the horrific Centralia Battle in which many Shelby County men lost their lives. On September 13 and 14, there will be a reenactment of the battle in Centralia. More information can be found at www.centraliabattlefield.com/#reenactment.

by Corby Cochener
Herald Reporter

When one thinks of 150 years ago, they realize that anyone from that time is no longer here on earth and to many it is a time forgotten in history. But each piece of history has helped to form who we are today and who we will be in the future.

During the Civil War, the most horrific battle took place on Missouri soil at Centralia and many men from Shelby County and surrounding areas lost their lives. September 27, 1864 is a day in American history that should not be forgotten.

Before the battle, according to wikipedia.org, the following took place: "In the fall of 1864, the Confederates, faced with a rapidly deteriorating position, launched an invasion of northern Missouri. It was led by General Sterling Price and his Missouri State Guard. The object was to influence the 1864 presidential election by capturing St. Louis and the state capital at Jefferson City. As part of his strategy, Price encouraged guerrilla warfare, especially the disruption of the railroads. "Bloody Bill" Anderson and his guerrilla company were among those who took part.

On September 23, 1864, Anderson engaged in a skirmish in Boone County, Missouri, seven miles east of Rocheport. His men managed to kill eleven Federal soldiers and three black civilian teamsters. The Federals responded the next day by shooting six of Anderson's men who were captured at a home in Rocheport.

That same day, September 24, Anderson attacked the pro-Union town of Fayette, losing thirteen killed and more than thirty wounded. Only one Union soldier had been killed and two wounded."

On the morning of September 27, Captain Bill Anderson and

a band of guerrillas took over the North Missouri Railroad Train, which had left St. Louis early the morning before. Upon being captured at Centralia, Anderson and his army killed the 23 Union soldiers, took their uniforms, robbed the passengers, set the train on fire and sent it down the track.

At about 3:00 p.m., Union Major A.V.E. Johnston, with 155 men of the newly formed 39th Missouri Infantry Regiment, arrived in Centralia.

There are several different accounts of the battle, but a very interesting account is one from Frank James, Jesse James brother. He returned to Centralia in February 1910 and the following excerpts are from the Kansas City Star, February 16, 1910:

"The most terrible conflict of the Civil War took place on Missouri soil. More lives were lost in proportion to the number of men engaged than were lost on any battlefield in American history. It was the battle of Centralia, September 27, 1864." "Centralia, then a mere hamlet, now a thriving town of 2,000 inhabitants, was, on the morning of the battle, crowded with visitors. They had come up from Columbia on the way to a political convention at Macon. Major James S. Rollins, James H. Waugh, John S. Samuel, James C. Orr and others. They only escaped by pretending to be Methodist ministers on their way to a conference. Nearly all the Centralia visitors of that day are dead."

The following is Frank James version: "The day before we had had a small skirmish down in Goslin's lane, between Columbia and Rocheport. I don't know what day it was. We could scarcely keep account of months and years at that time, much less days. We killed a dozen Yankee soldiers in Goslin's lane and captured a wagon train of provisions and stuff. Out in the Perche Hills that night we joined forces with Bill Anderson. I was with Captain George Todd, one of the hardest fighters that ever lived, but less desperate than Anderson.

"But Anderson had much to make him merciless. You remember the treatment his father and sisters received at the hands of the Kansas Jayhawkers. That night we camped on one of the branches ending into

terrible charge for anything. Up the hill we went, yelling like wild Indians. Such shrieks, young man, you will never hear as broke the stillness of that September afternoon.

On we went up the hill. All most in the twinkling of an eye, we were on the Yankee line. They seemed terrorized. Hypnotized might be a better word, though, I reckon nobody knew anything about hypnotism then... Some of the Yankees were at 'fix bayonets,' some were biting off their cartridges, preparing to reload. Yelling, shooting our pistols, upon them we went. Every one was shot through the head. The few who attempted to escape we followed into Centralia and on to Sturgeon. There a Federal blockhouse stopped further pursuit."

According to the September 29, 1897 edition of the Paris Mercury, the following was said about an interview with James: "Upon being asked why he didn't quit when the war was over, James' eyes sparkled fire, as he replied with spirit: 'They wouldn't let us quit. It was after the war was over that the Pinkertons threw a hand grenade in my mother's house one night, killing my seven year old brother and tearing my mother's right arm from her shoulder. There is two sides to the quitting question. Besides, we did not do the one-thousandth part of the things we got credit for doing. And I thank God that in the end, every man will have to answer only for what he did, and not what he is reputed to have done.'"

According to different reports from the day, Union Major A.V.E. Johnston, fell among the first and was shot in the head by Jesse James.

Many of the Union soldiers who lost their lives on that day were from Shelby County and left behind families. Fifty years after the event, The Shelbina Torchlight had this to say, "The day of the Centralia Massacre remains fresh in the memory of many older residents of Shelby County. In that fight were several from this county, who were shot down by Anderson's

men, among them being Louis Marquette, David N. Dunn, and William Lair, whose bodies were identified by James C. Hale at Sturgeon, Missouri, the day after the battle and sent to this county for interment. Mr. Hale went to Sturgeon for the purpose of identifying the bodies and had the remains shipped home to relatives. The other Union soldiers who met their death at this time were buried in a trench by the citizens of Centralia. B. F. Dunn and other citizens of Shelby County also made a trip to Centralia for the purpose of identifying others and bringing home the remains, but were unable to recognize any of them and left them buried in the trench.

A letter written by Enoch Hunt was sent to his family after the battle. He was one of the few that escaped with his life. Even after such a horrific battle, this letter shows the resolve and character of the Union soldiers. It appeared in the Centralia Fireside.

"Dear ones at home. We had a fight yesterday at Centralia, with Anderson and all got killed except 15 that we know of. We run to Sturgeon. We had 150 killed, they scalped all the officers. You may think that I want to get home, but I don't care. I am doing well. I stopped at Mr. Conger's as we came up there and all of the folks were well. The Rebels was at there the night before. I have seen more dead men than a few. I was not afraid even when I saw men fighting. I am in a hurry to help to tend to the things. I suppose that you heard of it and thought you fretted about me so thought I'd write and let you know whether I was killed or not. You must excuse writing, so I will close."

Major Johnson, who led the soldiers into battle, was previously a school teacher and most likely should have remained a teacher than to lead so many into a gruesome battle. These men not only lost their lives, but reports state they were scalped, had limbs severed, fingers removed and more brutal acts. These men should not be forgotten and beginning next week, we will highlight a few of the men from Shelby County.