

The Battle of Crane's Nest

copyright 1998

Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr.

Big Stone Gap, Va.

When the Civil War started, the citizens of the mountains of Wise and Buchanan Counties of Virginia (Dickenson Co. was formed from Wise and Buchanan Cos. after the War) ; and of Pike and Letcher Counties, Kentucky found to their dismay, that the state line atop of Pine Mountain had become the frontier dividing the two warring sections of the nation. Few of the men along the state line found enough convictions about the conflict to join up with either side early in the War, and tried to wait it out by staying in their mountain fastness.

As the War progressed, however, forced conscription and appropriation of the people's food and horses for use for the forming armies soon produced anger that quickly exploded into violence and counter violence. The culture of the people was heavily influenced by their Cherokee roots, and bushwhacking was the mode of warfare of choice. Families split, and made war on each other and on their neighbors. Clan revenge killings repeated themselves like claps of thunder in a summer storm, and soon no one remembered, nor little cared, who had been the first to draw blood.

Gradually, proUnion people in Virginia had to move to Kentucky, and Kentuckians of Confederate sympathies left for Virginia. Men of the region began to join together into informal guerrilla bands to protect themselves and their families from each other. The violence was awesome. Recruitment into these units was often by force, and desertion commonplace. When captured, these men usually executed each other, and a maddening maelstrom of killings swept the countryside.

In order to gain some control of these units, both National Governments tried to take these irregular bands into their armies and gave them official designations. The bands sought this relationship for themselves, as it made them official prisoners of war if captured, and as such, they were afforded protection from execution.

Early in the War, a Wise Co. Confederate Unit invaded Pike Co., and was captured for its troubles, and its men were imprisoned in Camp Chase, Ohio. There they met Confederate Major Clarence J. Prentice, who was also a prisoner. Prentice was the son of the editor of the "Louisville Daily Journal", a proUnion man. When they were all paroled, Prentice followed his new acquaintances back to their Wise County home. In 1863, even though he was only 22, he formed the local Confederate Home Guard

into the 7th Battalion of Confederate Cavalry. It operated in Wise and Buchanan Counties, and kept its rear base at Castlewood. Here Prentice, now a Lt. Col., kept a military brothel for his men, and kept its ladies fed and supplied with bedding by raiding the people up and down the Valleys of Copper Creek and Big Moccasin Creek in Scott Co. The 7th never filed an official muster role with the Confederate Government, but was estimated to have contained about 250 men.

Counterfoil to Prentice was Alf Killen. Living on Crane's Creek in Wise Co. (now Dickenson Co.), and from a family of divided loyalties, and a quarter Cherokee, he had been forcibly recruited into the Confederate State Line Partisan Rangers early in the War. He deserted, and made his way to Kentucky, where he joined a Union company and was persuaded by its officer, Captain Gallop of Louisa, to return to Wise County and to organize a proUnion Home Guard. His method of recruitment was to ride up to a mountain homestead with his band, and to tell its young men, "You've got to come and go with me". To refuse was death. This Wise Co. proUnion Home Guard became officially designated as either Company K or F of the 39th Ky. Infantry, and operated in Wise Co. out of a base located in Pike Co., Ky.

Early in November 1864 Prentice's men, under the immediate command of Major Chenworth, began a sweep into the Valley of the Crane's Nest River to keep an eye on some of the proUnion people in that area. This river, named for the nests the cranes had built near the junction of Birchfield Creek and of Crane's Nest River in the country between the current towns of Coeburn, Wise, Clintwood, and Pound, flows through the most remote of the country involved in the conflict between Prentice's and Killen's factions. Down the river they went, taking or destroying the property of its proUnion settlers. High on their list of suspected Union sympathizers were Oliver and Reuben Powers, who lived at Power's Mill on Crane's Nest River near Darwin.

Alf Killen was home on leave, apparently with a sizable number of his 39th Ky. Infantry, when he heard "that there was a big gang of Democrats on Crane's Nest". He gathered his men together, and recruited about 40 others from the proUnion community mostly from along Holly Creek, with the intent to bushwhack the larger Confederate force.

Isaac and Harmon Mullins were at their father's home when they heard of these events, and joined Killen's men on Sunday morning, November 8, 1864. Also with them were Jim and Jack Mullins, Eli Vanover, and George Howell. The band made its way to George Buchanan's, near Darwin. Buchanan, a proUnion man himself, ground up some corn meal with a hand mill and slaughtered a beef for them to eat. Earlier this Sunday, Killen had stolen some horses from Kelly Keel at Crane's Nest, and Keel

and his friends bushwhacked them at the home of Ed French, and a bullet went through a crack in French's log home and barely missed one of his daughters, who was in bed. Ed and his sister, Nan, became incensed, and went to Prentice's men, and told them of the coming Yankees.

The Confederate force rushed to Buchanan's, only to find that Killen and his men had left. Buchanan fed the Confederates, who captured Keel Hibbitts and Hop Dotson, whom they took with them back to their camp in the Power's apple orchard on the southern bank of Crane's Nest River at Power's Mill, where they were locked up under guard in the Power's barn.

The night of Sunday November 8, 1864 was spent in feverish planning and counter planning of various bushwhacks. Killen and the Union Home Guard planned to bushwhack the larger Confederate force as they stirred at dawn. Knowing this, Prentice planned a counter bushwhack. The plan was for the Confederates to build up large camp fires in their camp in the apple orchard on the south bank of the Crane's Nest River, and to leave a few men standing silhouetted around them as sucker bait. Killen's force would have to approach the camp through the saddle at the head of the hollow leading to the meadow along the north bank. The Confederates hid themselves in the bushes at the tree line at the edge of the meadow, leaving the passage through the hollow open. They waited for the Union Home Guard to pass through the double bushwhack set up by the Confederates. In the frosty dark night everything did not go according to plan. Sure enough, the unsuspecting would be bushwhacking Unionists passed through the lines of concealed Confederates, but succeeded in opening fire on the men in front of the camp fires on the south bank before the Confederate bushwhack sprang into blazing action. The opening volley killed Confederate Billy Noble, a "Yankee Jumper" or a deserter from the Union Army; and wounded "Devil" John Wright. Wright was later to become the prototype for "Bad Ruff" Toliver in *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. Noble died on his feet, and his body fell into the camp fire and began to burn.

At this point the Confederate counter bushwhackers opened up, and killed nine of Killen's men. The traditional list of Union slain is: Bob Killen (Alf's brother), John Rose, Henry Yates, Charles Hibbitts, Parker Wheatley, Wesley Mullins (grandson of the famous "counterfeitin' Sol Mullins of Holly Creek), Henry Buchanan (a shoemaker), Isaac (Ike) Bartley, and "Buck John" Rose. Eli Vanoner's arm was shattered. Another tradition lists Sam Bowman among the slain of Killen's unit.

Others traditionally among Killen's men were Capt. Nathaniel Collins, Draper Powers, Alex Powers, John Powers, Isaac "Black Ike" Mullins of Clintwood, Harmon Mullins, Joe Hibbitts, Rich Hibbitts, and Henry Powers. The Mullins were not in the 39th, but joined the group on

Sunday just for the attack.

Among Prentice's men were Jack Frye, John Mc Fall of Bold Camp, Rube McFall, Wes White, and John McLemore.

Killen's men faded back into the shadows of the dark night, and made for a gap in the hills to escape. A Confederate detachment under Sam Caldwell made a rush for the gap in an attempt to head the Union Home Guard, but got there five minutes too late.

Back in Prentice's camp, Katy Powers, the wife of Reubon, and an unknown person, pulled the body of Billy Noble out of the fire.

Killen's force broke up into individuals, who "scouted out" in the mountains for a while after the Battle of Crane's Nest, before reforming into a functional unit.

The bodies of the slain Unionists were mutilated Cherokee fashion, and hastily buried in shallow graves in the Power's apple orchard. Twelve days later some of the slain's relatives came and exhumed the bodies. Among those who came were the old men Wils Adkins, Davy Vance, Cassander Brummitt, Uncle Lib Fulton, Henry Senter (an old Baptist preacher), and Mary Killen (the daughter of Bob). Due to the cold weather, the bodies were well preserved, but difficult to identify due to the mutilation. Puncheons were used to make rough caskets, and most of the bodies were reburied on the spot. The bodies of Bartley and of Mullins were taken to the Pound River near Artrips, and reinterred. Charlie Hibbitts was buried at his home at Hibbitt's Gap.

In the last months of this horrible war, Killen's men began to come together as a unit, and once again began to pass up and down the byways of Wise Co.

Tandy Branham was sheriff of Wise Co., and even though proConfederate, he was exempt from the draft due to his holding a county office. One day Killen's Union Home Guard passed by Branham's place, and one of Killen's men - Harmon Hall - stole a mare from a hired hand named Spence, who worked for Branham. Branham gave chase, but one on the Home Guards dropped back and bushwhacked him. His corpse was wrapped in a knotted sheet, and was carried home suspended on a wooden fence rail by two men, who laid his body on the floor of Branham's home, where blood pooled on the floor. Killen and his men retreated to their base of operations in Pike Co. In revenge for the Branham killing, Joel Long pursued them into Kentucky, where he found Killen at the home of a Mrs. Gilliams on Mud Creek in Johnson County (another tradition says that this was in Floyd Co). Killen tried to escape, but Long shot and killed him. Long escaped back to Virginia wearing a woman's dress and bonnet.

Clarence Prentice survived the War, and afterwards when he was asked about fighting Union bushwhackers during the War, observed , "It is gratifying that many of them will 'whack' no more."

suggested further reading:

Johnson, Charles - Wise County Virginia

Sutherland, Elihu Jasper - Pioneer Recollections of Southwest Virginia

Weaver, Jeffrey C. - The Civil War in Buchanan and Wise Counties - Bushwhacker's Paradise

Wright, William T. - Devil John Wright of the Cumberlands