

Bushwhacker Museum Podcast Transcript

Narrator: On the night of December 20, 1858, two dozen men rode from John Brown's Kansas headquarters to the Vernon County, Missouri homes of James Lawrence, Isaac Larue, and David Cruise. When they returned to Kansas they left one Missouri pioneer lying dead in his nightshirt – and they carried with them 11 slaves, thousands of dollars worth of stolen livestock, wagons loaded with farm equipment, food, clothing, bedding and cash.

A grand jury indicted John Brown and his men for larceny and murder. But the lack of legal cooperation meant many Northern officials refused to serve slave-state warrants. John Brown and his men remained at large. Just a year later, Brown would be hanged for treason for attempting to provoke a slave revolt at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

Brown's posse targeted the homes of wealthy Vernon County slaveholders, according to Bushwhacker Museum Curator Patrick Brophy:

Patrick: You have to remember this was the rural frontier at the time, it hadn't been settled very long, and everybody's possessions, homes and so forth, were modest, at least as we would see them today. Lawrence was considered a well-to-do man at that time. The total value of his estate was \$5,000. At that time you could retire on \$5,000. He had the reputation of being kind of a wheeler-dealer. He probably loaned money to his less-fortunate neighbors. We do know that he hired out his slaves sometimes to hemp growers and hemp growers and hemp breakers in Jackson County.

Narrator: Bushwhacker Museum Coordinator Terry Ramsey has uncovered details of Mr. Lawrence's estate from probate records:

Terry: His property was described as a frame dwelling that was two stories tall, it had four rooms. He had 300 acres of property, 80 acres in timber and the rest in prairie. He had 25 acres that was fenced, under cultivation, had a good well in his yard, plus a good well for stock, fruit trees. So, for that period in time, when his neighbors were living in one- and two-room, very rude cabins, he was living quite nicely. And I can only assume that the other men involved in the raid were too, because they were obviously financially well-to-do because they did have slaves. So I would imagine that they were living in similar circumstances.

Narrator: In addition to the Lawrence property, the raiders stormed the properties of Isaac Larue and David Cruise. Little is known about Isaac Larue. However, David Cruise was a distinguished and storied citizen of Vernon County, according to Patrick Brophy.

Patrick: He was a well-known pioneer. He was the first bridegroom, first white man to be married. He married the daughter of one of the first settlers in the county. That wife had died and he had remarried to a very young girl, as his second wife. I don't know how old she was, but he was 60 years old at least at that time. He had a reputation for buried gold. Everybody knew about his supposed buried gold, and that probably attracted the raiders. It actually existed. His son, Rufus confirmed that in later life, that it was buried in the saddle. They went over to the saddle house and they just did not find it. They got a lot of gold out of his pockets, but they didn't find the buried gold.

Narrator: By the time of the Vernon County raid, John Brown had already earned a reputation as a divisive figure. To some, he was a freedom fighter. To others, he was a murderous terrorist. Brown moved to Kansas in October 1855, and engaged in his first brutal raids in the Spring 1856. In May, Brown retaliated against a pro-slavery attack on Lawrence, Kansas by murdering five pro-slavery men who had settled along Pottawatomie Creek. In the same year, he engaged pro-slavery militias in the Battles of Black Jack and Osawatomie. In 1857, Brown left Kansas to raise funds for his cause, returning to the Territory with plans to provoke a Civil War by inciting a slave rebellion in the South.

Not all free-state advocates or abolitionists agreed with Brown's tactics. Among those who disagreed with Brown's violent approach were New England Emigrant Aid Company leader Charles Robinson and Brown's brother-in-law Samuel Adair, an abolitionist minister and early founder of Osawatomie, Kansas,

According to some accounts, Brown used the Vernon County Raid as a fundraiser and rehearsal for his more-famous raid on Harpers Ferry.

In a press release he issued after the event John Brown stated that the raid was a response to a slave's plea for help.

Terry: Lawrence's slave Jim had been over in Kansas and had talked to Brown. And he had told him that his deceased master, because his master was deceased, that he and his family were going to be sold. This is the story that Brown told, and he wasn't always the most truthful man, but according to him, Jim had told him that they were going to be sold down into Texas, where conditions were worse for slaves. He was going to have to work harder, it was hotter, the death rate was higher, the masters were crueler, all of these different things. So he begged Brown for help. And that's Brown's story and he never changed it.

Narrator: The *Fort Scott Democrat*, based in nearby Bourbon County, Kansas, provides a pro-Southern account of the raid.

Male Voice: The thieves organized in two distinct parties, one taking the north and the other the south side of the Osage river, which at the time was past fording. The band on the north side proceeded into the State, by way of Fail's trading Post, and commenced operations by robbing the widow Lawrence of five negroes, one ox team and wagon, besides other valuable property that our informant could not give, from Mrs. Lawrence. They went to Isaac Larue's about one mile distant, and robbed him of the same number of negroes, six valuable horses, one yoke of oxen and most of his household goods. During all this while the party on the other side of the river had not been idle; they not only robbed but murdered. On coming to the house of old Mr. Crews who had been a valuable and law-abiding citizen of Vernon county Missouri for the past twenty years – they entered his house and demanded his money; on his refusal, one of the gang fired, the ball piercing the old man's heart. He expired immediately. Eleven mules and a large amount of other property was taken from his premises. Mr. Martin was also robbed." *Fort Scott Democrat*, December 23, 1858.

Narrator: Pro-southern and free-state sources alike condemned Brown's Vernon County Raid, believing his actions were designed to stir up trouble.

Terry: When you think about the Harpers Ferry Raid, John Brown was very good at self-promotion. He was extremely skilled in that. And I think he used that, he built on

that success to help establish, to garner that support that he needed to carry out the raid back east, which was what he really always wanted to do.

Narrator: If the Vernon County raid was meant to provoke unrest, it succeeded. Among the papers that reported on the incident was the *New York Times*, which sent a correspondent to cover events related to what it called the “Insurrectionary Movement in Southern Kansas.” Like that of most nineteenth century papers, the Times’ coverage was not only inaccurate, but also biased. The Times’ account of the event closely matched John Brown’s account, given in his famous press release entitled “Old Brown’s Parallels.” In it, Brown justified his acts as revenge for the Marais des Cygnes Massacre in which pro-slavery raiders lined up and shot at eleven free-state men, killing five and wounding five others.

The raid, which was one of the last acts of border violence before the Civil War, is credited with propelling John Brown to national prominence and embittering Missourians against Kansans and the North.

Terry: When you compare Vernon County to other counties in Missouri, proportionate to our population, more men went to the Confederate Army than in any other county in the state. So it was very strongly pro-Confederate, and I think that John Brown’s raid and other incidents of the same type of incidences are the reason that they became so pro.

Narrator: According to a contemporary account, those who did not enter the Confederate army became bushwhackers, or guerilla warriors.

Terry: It was in, what, 1863 that Thomas Ewing was writing a letter, report, and he was talking about the men in western Missouri and what was happening there, and he said that “about half of the farmers in the border tier have been in the rebel service. One half of those are dead, or still in the rebel service, and the other half have gone to Bushwhacking.”

It’s very simply this: you do what you have to do to survive. And that’s what people were doing. And if what you had to do was go to Bushwhacking to survive, then you did it. If what you did to survive as a woman here alone was look to those Bushwhackers to help you, even if you didn’t maybe agree with everything that they were doing, that’s what you’d do because that was your only chance.

Narrator: When the war was over, many citizens respected bushwhackers for having protected their communities. In Vernon County, one former sheriff and bushwhacker was re-elected to the post after the war.

Vernon was among the counties that made up the Burnt District, a region forcibly evacuated by the Union army to clear the area of bushwhackers. Between 1860 and the end of the war, the population of Nevada, the county seat, plunged from 450 to 200.

Those who returned never forgot the man who forever changed the character of their small community.

Patrick: My maternal ancestors were here at the time, and in that family, if you mentioned him, they’d explode “Oh, Maddog Brown,” that was how they always referred to him.

Narrator: The Bushwhacker Museum in Nevada, Missouri, tells the story of Brown's Vernon County raid and the region's border-war history.