

### Jayhawkers: The Civil War Brigade of James Henry Lane

Willard Carl Klunder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Klunder, Willard Carl (2009) "Jayhawkers: The Civil War Brigade of James Henry Lane," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss4/12>

## Review

Klunder, Willard Carl

Fall 2009

**Benedict, Bryce D.** *Jayhawkers: The Civil War Brigade of James Henry Lane.* University of Oklahoma Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9780806239999

### Seeking the Real Jayhawkers

This book recounts the exploits of the Kansas regiments and their eccentric commander, James H. Lane, during the early months of the Civil War. The focus is on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Volunteers, which made up the core of "Lane's Brigade." The author, an army and National Guard veteran, is an attorney for the state of Kansas.

Lane served as colonel of the Third Indiana Volunteer Regiment during the Mexican-American War, and saw action at Buena Vista. As a Democratic member of the House of Representatives, he supported the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Choosing not to run for re-election, he arrived in Kansas in April 1855, and tried to organize a territorial Democratic Party. Benedict argues that, "Lane's transformation from conservative Democrat to radical Free State man came about gradually," but within a matter of months he chaired the Free State Party's platform committee (17). In late 1857, the legislature elected him major general of the territorial militia.

Following his participation in the bloodless "Wakarusa War," Lane "returned to a more conventional life" (19). This included remarrying his divorced wife, and killing a neighbor over a dispute involving a well. As the violence in "Bleeding Kansas" reached a crescendo, James Montgomery, Charles R. Jennison, and John E. Stewart (future regimental commanders of the Kansas Brigade) drove pro-slavery men out of the territory. Lane apparently disappeared from the scene, despite commanding the militia. He returned to public life to campaign for Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

Kansas entered the Union in January 1861. Lane and Samuel C. Pomeroy were the state's original Federal senators. After the surrender of Fort Sumter, Kansas Governor Charles Robinson raised three volunteer regiments, with James Montgomery serving as colonel of the Third Volunteers. Soon thereafter, Lincoln urged Secretary of War Simon Cameron to appoint Lane a brigadier general with the authority to recruit two regiments. According to Benedict, Lincoln "wanted a commander who would *act* and not spend his time calling for reinforcements and explaining why he could not advance" (34). To demonstrate this point, Benedict recounts Lincoln's exasperation with General George B. McClellan the following year.

Lane did not accept the military commission because he would have had to resign from the Senate. He did, however, authorize William Weer to begin raising the troops, and serve as colonel for the Fourth Kansas Volunteers. The Fifth was organized independently by Hamilton P. Johnson of Leavenworth, and included many Iowans and Missourians. Jennison's company of "Southern Kansas Jay-Hawkers" was based in Mound City. On August 10, General John C. Frémont authorized Jennison to raise a regiment of mounted volunteers. "Jennison operated as he saw fit, and he saw fit to raid Missouri" (41).

Meanwhile, Lane assembled "a motley staff" in Washington made up of Lieutenant James M. Pomeroy (a cousin of the senator) and three Italians—Captain Luigi Navoni and Lieutenants Giuseppe Laiguanite and Achille de Vecchi (58). An unidentified Kansas soldier remarked on the foreign volunteers, "they are fine looking men, and if they could speak our language no doubt they would be very efficient officers" (64). In an appendix, Benedict adds a Lieutenant Luigi Marini to the roster, but can find no further evidence of the Italians' service with the brigade.

In the fall, General Frémont raised forty thousand men to destroy Sterling Price's army, the only formidable Confederate force in the Kansas-Missouri theater. Lane and Samuel Sturgis led one column out of Kansas City; other commanders included David Hunter, John Pope, and Franz Sigel. Ultimately, the ineffectual Frémont was replaced by General Daniel Hunter who gave up the fruitless pursuit of Price. The southern forces went into camp near Osceola, Missouri, a town previously sacked by Montgomery. Benedict devotes his final chapter to a systematic look at the machinations behind this "great Southern expedition"; rehashing the tale sketched in the previous pages.

Lane's brigade returned to Fort Scott in the middle of November, and the senator soon thereafter left for Washington. "As events would reveal, Lane's departure heralded the gradual decline of the brigade, largely due to neglect by the Federal government" (159). Guerilla raids, however, continued beyond early 1862, when the Kansas regiments were reorganized.

Lane was a querulous, exasperating cohort. He quarreled with Sturgis over rank; and argued with the commander of Fort Leavenworth ("the dirty puppy") and the governor ("that still dirtier creature") (115). Lane on one occasion addressed his own men as "sneaking thieves" for stealing a widow's "night-dress, her skillet, and her chickens" (94). In truth, the jayhawkers in the brigade acted with impunity. In his annual message to the legislature in January 1862, Governor Robinson complained that Kansas was "overrun with thieves and highway robbers" (175). Contrastingly, the *Cincinnati Gazette* viewed the complex Lane as a Robin Hood, who gave confiscated goods "to poor Union families who had been robbed by rebels" (130).

For his part, Lane railed against slavery and took every opportunity "to strike the shackles from every limb" to hasten the defeat of the Confederacy (150). He did not, however, endorse racial equality. Lane favored colonization for the freed slaves, perhaps even in South Carolina, because the "races can't live together without intermarriage," which he opposed (151). The author repeats this quotation on page 187; one of numerous redundancies throughout the text.

Whatever one thinks of Lane, Benedict rightly notes that the accomplishments of his brigade, "as a military instrument, were relatively insignificant" (249). Kansas was never in serious danger of an invasion by Price; and during the course of their service, only twenty brigade members were killed in combat. Lane, after narrowly escaping death during Quantrill's raid on Lawrence, committed suicide in July 1866.

The author is at his best revealing the bombastic cant of military commanders. Sterling Price, for example, issued a proclamation to Missourians seeking fifty thousand volunteers. Benedict wryly notes that it was "very badly worded" (163). Price rhetorically asked if Missourians were "a timid, time-serving, craven race, fit only for subjection to a despot?" He then noted the extreme hardships his men endured and the deaths they suffered from battle and disease. "If none of this had yet dissuaded a man from volunteering," Price urged potential recruits to bring their own guns, cooking utensils, rations, blankets, and

shoes. The author succinctly concludes: "As a recruiting tool, Price's proclamation had little to commend it" (164).

In the main, however, Benedict provides little critical analysis of the border clashes. Montgomery's men, for instance, sacked Morristown and five prisoners were condemned by a "drum-head court-martial" and "executed. The greater part of the town was burned (apparently on orders from Montgomery), and there being no other outrage to commit, the raiders returned to West Point" (89). The fact that ten Southerners were taken into custody, and only five executed, is strong evidence that this was not a capricious act. Although Benedict offers the reader several plausible explanations for the condemnation of those specific prisoners, he never weighs in with his considered judgment.

The narrative lacks historical balance. William Quantrill is off-handedly characterized as a "young ne'er-do-well . . . who hung around the neighborhood looking to make a quick buck" (51). The author spends more time discussing one soldier's bout with measles than the sacking of three Missouri towns by Jennison's band. Throughout the text, soldiers in Kansas units are indiscriminately referred to as "jayhawkers," while those fighting for the South are "secesh, secessionists, or rebels." This can be confusing, especially when jayhawkers returned "slaves and property taken from secessionists who proved they were Union men" (114).

This rambling book, in short, is essentially a hodge-podge of anecdotes and vignettes that frequently obscure more than they enlighten. Benedict, to cite one example, briefly mentions "a citizen named E. A. Hitchcock" who consulted with Secretary of War Stanton in March 1862 (214). That indistinguishable private citizen, doubtless, was Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, grandson of the Revolutionary hero and the unofficial general-in-chief of the Union forces who met regularly with Stanton.

The apparent lack of a rigorous editorial review detracts considerably from this book. The author has a disconcerting habit of stringing incongruent information together in a single paragraph. Benedict retells some of the "more outrageous and unreliable accounts" of the attack on Osceola, Missouri, and dismisses an "apparently exaggerated account" in the *New York Times* that claims \$8,000 was taken from a family named Vaughn. However, he subsequently relates an exchange between Sturgis and Lane in which the latter implicitly admitted to the \$8,000 theft. He also repeats the same *Times* story, in a

different context, without questioning its accuracy (101, 102, 130). Similarly, Benedict chides Albert Castel and Thomas Goodrich, among others, for citing second-hand sources; nonetheless, his sole citation regarding Quantrill's raid on Aubrey, Kansas, is a twentieth-century secondary source (240-41, 212). In summary, Benedict's pedestrian writing style and lack of historical analysis detract considerably from his efforts.

*Willard Carl Klunder is an associate professor of history At Wichita State University. He is the author of Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation (Kent State University Press), and numerous articles and book reviews.*