A Story of Brave Kansans

by Richard D. Rogers

Elizabeth Akers Allen (1832–1911) authored a poem entitled "Rock Me to Sleep" in which one stanza reads:

Backward turn backward
Oh time in your flight,
And make me a child again
Just for tonight.

I want to use the poem in a different manner and have you join me on a longer journey back to October 22, 1864. We will rewrite the poem to read:

Backward turn backward
Oh time in your flight,
And take us to Westport,
Just for the fight.

Thus we will return to the greatest crisis ever faced by Kansas and the most interesting and heroic battle fought by the army of the West in the Civil War.

In my research for this article, I find that many trained historians, in fact, many giants in the field of history, have explored in great detail the raid of General Sterling Price into Missouri and Kansas in the fall of 1864. I also find that most laymen, even those in Shawnee...
County, Kansas, have no information at all about the severe losses suffered by a Shawnee County unit and the many heroic acts performed by members of the Kansas militia. As a layman, I am reluctant to expose my findings, views, and conclusions in an area where many experts have spoken. Compared with the other writers, I am a dwarf. Perhaps in this respect I am like the young new lawyer who was to speak to an appellate court after his older oppo-

\[\text{During General Sterling Price's 1864 raid into Missouri and Kansas, the Kansas militia and the Shawnee County unit suffered severe losses. This painting by militia member Samuel J. Reader depicts the Second Kansas State Militia in action at the Battle of the Big Blue.}\]

ponent, a giant of the bar, had spoken. He acknowledged his inadequacies, his opponent’s stature, and then said, “Since I am following this giant of the bar, and I am a dwarf, sometimes a dwarf riding on the shoulders of a giant can see further than the giant, and my position may very well be entitled to your complete approval.” This is my hope for my effort.

In addition I want to explore this battle with a politician’s eyes, an ex-soldier’s eyes, and the eyes of a resident of Shawnee County, as the battle hit this area with a crushing impact. So, with my apologies to real historians, I embark on my story.

In September 1864 Kansans, for the first time in years, felt a sense of security and felt that their worst times were behind them. Just a year before, General Thomas Ewing’s Order No. 11, issued four days after the Quantrill massacre at Lawrence, had cleared out many Missourians from the border counties. This brought about some decrease in the border warfare, and Kansans were hoping to lead normal frontier lives. The war in the East was going well under the leadership of Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman.

All in all, it was a typical Kansas fall that can be illustrated by the poem of Helen Hunt Jackson (1831–1885) entitled “September,” which is known to you and which was a favorite of my mother. It reads, in part:

The goldenrod is yellow;
The corn is turning brown;
The trees in apple orchards
With fruit are bending down.

The gentian's bluest fringes
Are curling in the sun;
In dusty pods the milkweed
Its hidden silk has spun.

The sedges flaunt their harvest,
In every meadow nook;
And asters by the brookside
Make asters in the brook.

From dewy lanes at morning
The grapes' sweet odors rise;
At noon the roads all flutter
With yellow butterflies.

By all these lovely tokens
September days are here,
With summer's best of weather,
And autumn's best of cheer.

Unfortunately the sense of security enjoyed by the people of Kansas during the fall of 1864 was not really warranted because a common joke in Civil War Missouri boasted that the state of Missouri enjoyed five, not four, seasons. The seasons were spring, summer, fall, Price's raid, and winter. Price was General Sterling Price of Missouri, who, along with his subordinates Joseph O. Shelby and John S. Marmaduke, was responsible for annual raids into his nominally pro-Union state; 1864 would be no exception.

General Price, who played the villain of this story from the Kansas viewpoint, was born in Virginia on September 11, 1809. He attended college and became a lawyer. By 1840 he was a prosperous tobacco planter in Missouri and owned a dozen slaves. His political rise was rapid. He was speaker of the Missouri House of Representatives, a congressman in Washington, and a governor of Missouri. He raised a cavalry regiment in the Mexican War and returned with the brevet rank of brigadier general. Price, like many Missourians, had believed that Kansas should be a slave state, and when war came in 1861, he threw his lot with the Confederacy, supporting a state government in exile until the end.2

Price's 1864 raid was authorized by order dated August 4, 1864, issued by General Edmund Kirby Smith at Shreveport, Louisiana. The order read:

Rally the loyal men of Missouri, and remember that our great want is men... Make St. Louis the objective point of your movement, which, if rapidly made, will put you in possession of that place, its supplies, and military stores, and which will do more toward rallying Missouri...

Another broad purpose of the raid was to stop the transfer of additional troops to Tennessee to help Union General George Thomas in his battle with General John Bell Hood.

Thus, on August 29, 1864, Major General Sterling Price assumed command of the expeditionary forces at Princeton, Arkansas. On September 19 his columns—approximately fifteen thousand men strong—entered Missouri. Price had reorganized his army into three divisions commanded respectively by Generals James F. Fagan, Marmaduke, and Shelby. The advance went well until September 24, 1864, when the army reached Pilot Knob, Missouri, which was eighty-six miles south of St. Louis. Here Brigadier General Thomas Ewing, a Kansan, had about thirteen hundred men strongly entrenched. General Price threw two divisions against the small force. Both divisions suffered terribly as they attempted to cross an open three hundred-acre plain. Ewing had eleven well-placed guns. The rebel force had fifteen thousand men with ten guns, and before the battle was over and Ewing was forced to retreat, the rebels lost fifteen hundred men killed or wounded. This ended the brief but brilliant service of General Ewing against General Price. The gallant action of General Ewing and his troops in all probability saved St. Louis.

Price continued north and west and merely demonstrated against St. Louis and Jefferson City. Both cities were too strongly entrenched to be attacked successfully. On October 10 Price reached Booneville, Missouri, and after a skirmish headed west for Kansas and Fort Leavenworth.

Commanding the forces preparing to defend the infant Sunflower State was Samuel R. Curtis, a West Point graduate who had led the victorious Union forces at the important Battle of Pea Ridge in 1862. Curtis was born on February 3, 1805, and died on December 26, 1866. He came from a prominent family in the East, but the family had moved to Ohio. He graduated from West Point in 1831 and in 1832 resigned to work as an engineer. He later studied law and practiced at Wooster, Ohio. He rejoined the army at the time of the Mexican War and

was a colonel of the Third Ohio Infantry. He served in Congress and at the outbreak of the Civil War became colonel of the Second Iowa Infantry. At the time of the Price raid, he was
the commander of the Department of Kansas. He had about forty-five hundred regular army
troops in Kansas. However, they were scattered with some at Fort Leavenworth, some with
General James G. Blunt fighting Indians in central Kansas, and some at Fort Scott under
Major General George Sykes. Shortly thereafter, General Blunt replaced General Sykes as
commander of the District of Southern Kansas.

General Curtis, worried about his meager forces, realized that every soldier in Kansas
would be necessary to withstand Price’s army of trained veteran cavalrmen supported by
approximately two thousand bushwhackers headed by William C. Quantrill and “Bloody”
Bill Anderson. He desperately needed the Kansas volunteer militia forces.

As the movement of Price’s army became more certain, panic swept over the state. At
Lawrence, the people were in a state of anxious suspense all this time. Defeat at
Kansas City meant the destruction of Lawrence a second time. As the news kept
coming of the rebel advance and of rebel successes, the people began to prepare for the
worst. A large supply of empty government wagons happened just then to pass through the
town, and the merchants persuaded those in charge to load them with goods. Clothing, dry
goods, and other merchandise were packed in these wagons to keep them out of Price’s
hands. Many people buried their valuables in their yards. Families also filled trunks and
boxes with clothing and sent them to the country. They thus hoped to save something if the
town was burned again. The three hundred soldiers at Lawrence prepared for battle, but they
knew they would make a feeble stand against Price’s veteran forces.

However, one more very serious problem remained, and this was the political problem
of the forthcoming Kansas election where partisan feelings were wide and deep. Governor
Thomas Carney delayed and delayed in calling up the militia, although he was requested
and requested to take such action. He believed it unlikely that Price would attempt an inva-
sion of Kansas. He distrusted General Curtis whom he considered a supporter of Carney’s
bitter political foe, James H. Lane. “[I]n view of the approaching elections,” wrote Ed
Langsdorf, “Carney believed that the whole idea of mobilizing the militia was nothing more
than a scheme of the Lane camp to take the voters away from their homes, thereby making
it impossible to hold an election at all or giving the Lane faction an advantage.”

The governor finally issued the order that mobilized more than twelve thousand men on
October 8, but certain Kansas newspapers continued to find fault with the mobilization and
made Curtis’ defense plans much more difficult. One opposition paper, the Lawrence Journal,
went so far as to announce that Price had left Missouri and that the militia should be
released. Governor Carney at the time owned the Leavenworth Times, which was freely
circulated among his militia. Up to the time when General Blunt was fighting and falling
back before Price’s advance from Lexington to Independence, Missouri, on October 19, 1864,
the Times, under scarecrow headline, was telling the militia and the people of Kansas that

5. Richard Cordley, A History of Lawrence, Kansas From the First Settlement to the Close of the Rebellion (Lawrence, Kans.: Law-
rence Journal Press, 1893), 265.
Price was not in Missouri. The governor’s paper called the whole thing a political scheme and insisted that under the laws of Kansas (which actually had been suspended by martial law decree on October 10) the militia did not have to cross the state line.

Attention should be called to the fact that many politicians attached themselves to the staffs of the generals and others engaged in frontline duties. The names that appear are Edmund G. Ross, later a U.S. senator; former governor Charles Robinson; John J. Ingalls, later a U.S. senator; Senator S.C. Pomeroy; Senator James H. Lane; Governor Thomas Carney; soon-to-be governor-elect Samuel J. Crawford; General Thomas Ewing; Preston Plumb, another future senator; and Adjutant General Cyrus K. Holliday, a founder of Topeka and the Santa Fe railroad. Clearly, they believed that if you were engaged in the battle your political career would flourish; if you opposed or hindered the battle, your political career would end.

Some of these men, such as Colonel Crawford, were experienced army officers and combat veterans. In earlier Civil War engagements Crawford had shown great courage and daring. Early in the war he was the captain of Company E, Second Kansas Volunteer Infantry. He was at this time the Union Party’s (Lane faction) candidate for governor, and after the November election in which he defeated the “regular” Republican Union Party nominee, S.O. Thatcher, Crawford became the third governor of the state of Kansas.

While the political battles raged in Kansas, General Price and his army moved slowly across the state of Missouri and toward the Kansas line. General Blunt, on October 19, had moved troops from the Kansas border to Lexington, Missouri, where he found the bulk of the Price army. General Blunt was driven out of Lexington and wanted to oppose the Price advance at the Little Blue River, nine miles east of Independence, Missouri. General Curtis chose not to furnish the necessary troops to try to oppose the crossing of the Little Blue, and he had started the fortification of the Big Blue River. One of the immediate problems was the reluctance of Kansas State Militia troops to leave the Kansas border and advance very deeply into Missouri. But, after considerable argument and the arrest of a few commanders, they moved to fortify the Big Blue in Missouri. The Big Blue, with its deep bed and steep banks lined with a dense growth of timber, afforded a strong line

of defense. The Kansas militia barricaded the lower crossing by felling trees across it. An upper crossing was not as well protected, and there fell the brunt of the battle. The rebels forced a passage after stubborn resistance by Kansas troops. 8

Ready for the defense of Kansas, General Curtis had five regular Kansas regiments, the Eleventh, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth, under General Blunt and at least ten thousand Kansas militia under General George W. Deitzler. General Curtis hoped to hold the Big Blue defense line until additional Union troops under General Alfred Pleasanton could close up from the rear and destroy Price. But when Price attacked at midday, he broke through the Union defenses with ease. General Shelby crossed the river above and below Byram’s Ford and turned the right flank of the Army of the Border.

At this point, the composition and actions of the Kansas State Militia, and particularly the fate of the Shawnee regiment (Second Kansas State Militia) under Colonel George W. Veale, becomes important.

Born May 20, 1833, near Washington, Indiana, George Washington Veale descended from one of the oldest American families, which originally settled in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1640. He was educated at Wabash College and came to Kansas with his wife at age twenty-three. He was one of the incorporators of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. In 1861 he joined the Union army and served in both the Fourth Kansas Infantry and later in the Sixth Kansas Cavalry. He saw service in twenty-seven active engagements. He served under General Ulysses S. Grant at Pittsburg Landing and under General Curtis at Pea Ridge. He was considered a brilliant and daring soldier. Colonel Veale, a Topeka resident, was mustered out as a major after having served his three-year stint. Veale was home but a few weeks, however, when he was appointed colonel of the Second Kansas State Militia.

Veale’s Shawnee countians were under Brigadier General M.S. Grant, whose command consisted of thirteen militia regiments totaling nearly seven thousand troops who rendezvoused at Olathe; additional regiments assembled at Atchison, Paola, Mound City, and Fort Scott. In all, 12,622 men were listed as available on the border, but it is estimated that sixteen thousand troops reported and some were kept at home. 9

To commence the participation of the Second Kansas State Militia, the following order was issued (Special Order No. 15):

I. The commanding officer, 1st Brigade, will, on receipt of this order, move the 2d K.S.M., Colonel Veale commanding, and the 21st K.S.M., Colonel Lowe commanding, to the crossing of the Big Blue, near Hickman’s Mills, Missouri.

II. The officers commanding this force, on arriving at the point designated, will proceed at once to fortify that crossing for defensive purposes, and picket thoroughly the country on the opposite side.

By order of Major-General Deitzler, K.S.M., John T. Morton, A.A.G.

Colonel Veale’s command moved out on the morning of October 21, crossed the state line, marched through Westport, and to the ford near Hickman’s Mills, where he encamped.

In his subsequent official report of the October campaign, Kansas Adjutant General Cyrus K. Holliday set out in full the details as reported by Colonel George W. Veale regarding the action of the troops under his command. Veale recounted how his unit was sent forward and was ordered by General Grant to form a line of battle, which the troops did. The Shawnee regiment by itself fought Jackman’s Brigade of General Shelby’s division. Left alone to face an enemy that outnumbered him six to one, Colonel Veale reported that his command was sacrificed — raw militia troops versus Price’s rebel veterans and bushwhackers.

Veale did not place blame, but he was bitter when he said:

It is not for me to say upon whom rests the responsibility of scattering our forces in such a manner as to preclude the possibility of cooperation or unity of action. I can only say that I acted under orders, and in so doing lost twenty-four brave Kansans killed, about the same number wounded, and sixty-eight taken prisoners, among them four officers and one 24-pound brass howitzer and one hundred horses.

The enemy’s loss in killed and wounded in this engagement was also heavy, as our prisoners passing over a portion of the field a few moments after the battle counted forty-three dead rebels.

While my loss is very severe, I have to thank God that the stand taken by my brave men gave the enemy an afternoon job that detained them from marching into Kansas; and the next morning they were confronted by an army that neither yielded them ground nor spared their ammunition, but put them on a hasty retreat Southward; and thus Kansas was saved.

On the morning of the 24th we gathered together our dead (our wounded having been already cared for), and took them to Kansas City, where we obtained coffins for them; and on the morning of the 25th we buried them at Wyandot — on Kansas soil. From there we marched home to meet our mourning friends and tell the sad story of the fallen.10

According to William T. McClure, a member of the Fourth Kansas State Militia who took part in and observed the Second’s desperate fight, the Shawnee County troops were placed behind a rock wall and

ordered to hold it, while other regiments were engaged elsewhere. The Eleventh regiment was fighting on the east, but the rebels continued to advance, and massed on the edge of the

timber, to make a charge on the rock fence. It was far enough so that a rifle could not reach it from the timber. They moved out of the woods several columns deep, and double quick for the fence. The Topeka militia held their fire until the rebels were within fifty yards of the fence; then they poured such a deadly fire that they mowed down nearly all of the first line. This checked the rebel line for a few moments, but they came again and again, and the Topeka boys lost twenty-two of their men killed...

Sunday morning, October 23, 1864, dawned clear and calm, soldiers and officers anxious to know the result of the day. At eight o'clock Price again attacked with a great deal of skill. I believe, if General Pleasanton had not come, Price would have done us up.

At about eleven o'clock we had twenty-four cannon working on the rebel lines. At this juncture General Pleasanton came up with 10,000 Missouri cavalry. At Independence he divided his army into two squads. Five thousand of them crossed at Byron’s ford and attacked Price in the rear, while Pleasanton crossed the Blue on the Kansas City road, with the other 5000, and attacked Price’s army on the east. Our commander at once ordered a forward movement on the rebel line. A Kansas yell went up, and all advanced. The rebel lines broke, and they were not allowed to stop. So ended the fight and Kansas City was saved.

Contemporary newspaper articles also commended the actions of Kansans when invasion threatened and compared the bravery exhibited to the less favorable reactions of the citizens of Pennsylvania when General Robert E. Lee invaded prior to the Gettysburg battle.

General Price and his army were turned south along the Kansas border. On October 25, 1864, he suffered severe losses at the Battle of Mine Creek in Kansas, and his army was saved only by the courageous and skillful actions of General Joe Shelby and his Iron Brigade. Mine Creek was a severe defeat for Price as five hundred prisoners were taken, in addition to some six hundred casualties, and Generals Marmaduke and Edward C. Cabell were captured by the Union forces. After a further defeat on October 28, 1864, at Newtonia, Missouri, General Price gained safety south of the Arkansas River on December 2, 1864. Overall, this, his final Missouri raid, ended in failure.

Few people in Shawnee County today understand the impact of the 1864 Price campaign on the county or on the lives of its citizens. Adjutant General Holliday did however, and on December 31, 1864, following the defeat of Price, Holliday submitted his official report to Governor Carney. He praised the Second Kansas State Militia, which had sacrificed so much, and singled out several individuals, among them the Second’s commanding officer, Colonel George W. Veale.

Veale’s postwar career was almost as illustrious as the career of General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of Gettysburg fame. In addition to continued service in the Second Kansas State Militia, Veale served in the Kansas legislature for eighteen years, being elected to both the house and the senate, and became very successful in business. The Veales built a showplace of a home at Seventh and Quincy Streets in Topeka that contained the first bathroom, the first electric lights, and the first furnace to be put in any Topeka house. It was said that more famous people were entertained there than in any other house in Kansas; the list included President Ulysses S. Grant, his wife and family. The Veale home was torn down to make way for the Topeka City Auditorium.

After the Battle of Westport Colonel Veale, at his own expense, brought the bodies of the dead of his regiment home to Topeka and had them buried on a hill east of town, which is now the Topeka Cemetery. When he died on November 28, 1916, at the age of eighty-three, he was buried in the same cemetery where his comrades were laid to rest.12

On December 1, 1908, as president of the Kansas State Historical Society, he gave the annual address entitled “Coming In and Going Out” in which he spoke about his life and career. Colonel Veale expressed his pride in Kansas and in the Historical Society and his hope that a memorial building would be erected by Kansans as an enduring monument to her brave soldiers and public men.13

Among the other prominent Shawnee County residents to see action in the Battle of the Big Blue and at Westport was Guilford G. Gage, a private in Battery K under Captain Ross Burns. (Burns, who also is singled out for praise in the adjutant general’s report, was wounded and captured during the battle.) Born in Ashtabula County, Ohio, on October 17, 1834, Gage received only a common school education. He came to Kansas in 1856 and settled in Lawrence, Kansas, where he operated a brick kiln. He later moved to Topeka and resided there for forty years, preempting 160 acres of government land near the Potawatomi Indian Reservation and securing a farm west of the city of Topeka which is now Gage Park.

On the morning of October 22, 1864, Colonel Veale had halted his command in a narrow lane between two rail fences beside a farm known as the Mockbee Farm. The cannon and the twenty-eight-man battery were placed near an orchard. Guilford G. Gage was the number-two man in the battery. As the rebels approached in great numbers, Colonel Veale called to Captain Burns to “give them grape.” At first the cannon drove the rebels away and brought down many men, but eventually superior numbers prevailed. The rest of Veale’s men had been firing rapidly, but they were crushed from their places by a terrific charge by Shelby’s forces. Twenty-four men were killed, twenty men were wounded, and at least sixty-five men were captured, including Gage, Samuel J. Reader, and Captain A. J. Huntoon. Colonel Veale gradually withdrew his remaining men to the west where another defensive line was formed with other regiments. At the later Battle of Mine Creek, many of the prisoners, including Gage, escaped.

After the close of the Civil War, Gage championed the erection of a statue to be built at the Topeka Cemetery in honor of the brave men who died at the Battle of the Big Blue. In 1895 he personally furnished the sum of eight thousand dollars to provide such a monument. The monument was quarried and shaped in Vermont, and its granite base was surmounted by a life-sized figure of a private soldier in Civil War garb. It was placed in the center of the plot where fourteen of the men lost in the battle were buried. 14 At the time of the dedication, 380 Civil War graves were in the near vicinity.

On Memorial Day, May 30, 1895, the statue was dedicated. Guilford G. Gage, then sixty years of age, declined to give remarks so his brother spoke in his place. Several thousand people, including thirty-six members of the militia unit, attended. At the unveiling ceremony, Colonel Veale presided, and the address was given by General J. C. Caldwell. Special mention in the form of a eulogy was given by Howell Jones in honor of Captain Ross Burns, who died from his wounds four years after the battle. He had been serving as General Solicitor of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Company at the time of his death.

A special feature of the dedication ceremony was the reading of a gracious letter from General Joseph O. Shelby, who then resided in Kansas City, Missouri, and wrote from the headquarters of the United Confederate Veterans. He commented on the bravery of the Topeka battery commanded by Captain Burns, who so gallantly resisted his forces on October 22, 1864. Shelby said, "His defense against my superior forces was executed with masterly skill and superb courage. It was only after 43 of our men were dead and wounded on the field, Captain Burns had suffered a severe wound and their ammunition was spent, that they were compelled to surrender."

Although not mentioned in the letter, the forces of the Jackman Brigade were about to kill the wounded Captain Burns when General Shelby rode up, drew his sword, and defended Burns saying, "He is too brave to die that way."

The dedication was preceded by a large parade that formed in the vicinity of Sixth Street and Kansas Avenue. It was led by twenty police and patrol wagons and Marshall's Military Band. Thirty-five men of the Second Kansas State Militia also marched in the parade. Many dignitaries including the mayor, the city council, General Caldwell, Guilford G. Gage, and Howell Jones rode in carriages. Featured too were other military units and Jackson's Military Band.

As for Gage, he survived the 1895 festivities by only four years, dying of a stroke on May 15, 1899, at his residence at 409 Van Buren in Topeka. He was a wealthy man, and his estate carried out his wishes and donated the eighty-acre tract with a lake to the city. It is now our outstanding Gage Park and contains the Topeka Zoo.

The descendants of many of the soldiers who served in the Second Kansas State Militia still reside in Topeka. For example, the first sergeant of Company E was E. A. Goodell of

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Tecumseh, the great grandfather of attorney Gerald L. Goodell. The descendants of Colonel George W. Veale were prominent in Topeka affairs for many years following his death.

Sir Winston Spencer Churchill once wrote, “History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its themes, to revive its echoes and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.” It is difficult to look back 130 years and be fully aware of the stirring times that confronted our early-day Kansans. No one of that time is alive, and we must look to their writings to attempt to discern the fears, the sacrifices and the passions of those moments. Perhaps all we can do today is give tributes to the soldiers whose ranks have closed up. A fine tribute was given by the Washington Post of the Grand Army of the Republic in its resolution on the death of Colonel Shalor W. Eldridge of Lawrence. The resolution closed with the following poem:

The muffled drum’s sad call has beat
The soldier’s last tattoo;
No more on life’s parade shall meet
Those comrades, brave and true.
On fame’s eternal camping ground
Their silent tents are spread,
And glory guards with solemn sound,
The bivouac of the dead.

The story of the Price raid and the heroic actions of the Shawnee County militia is worth telling, telling, and retelling.  

Confederate General Joseph O. Shelby praised the bravery of the Topeka battery who so gallantly resisted his forces in 1864.