

# Riding With the Devil

## The Movie Adventures of William Clarke Quantrill

by John C. Tibbetts

Here's a sigh to those who love me,  
And a smile to those who hate;  
And whatever sky's above me,  
Here's a heart for every fate.  
—William Clarke Quantrill<sup>1</sup>

“A little time is all any of us have,” declares a guerrilla raider in the motion picture *The Jayhawkers*, “most of it lonely. It goes so fast. A man sings, loves, fights, and then he’s nothing. Dust. A leaf that falls and is gone.” But the story of guerrilla chieftain William Clarke Quantrill and the infamous raid he led against Lawrence, Kansas, in the summer of 1863 still lives on. Far from being a footnote to the history of the Civil War, consigned to dusty tomes, it continues to fascinate, even perplex historians, novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers alike—even if none of them seems to agree on the general outlines, much less the details of his life.

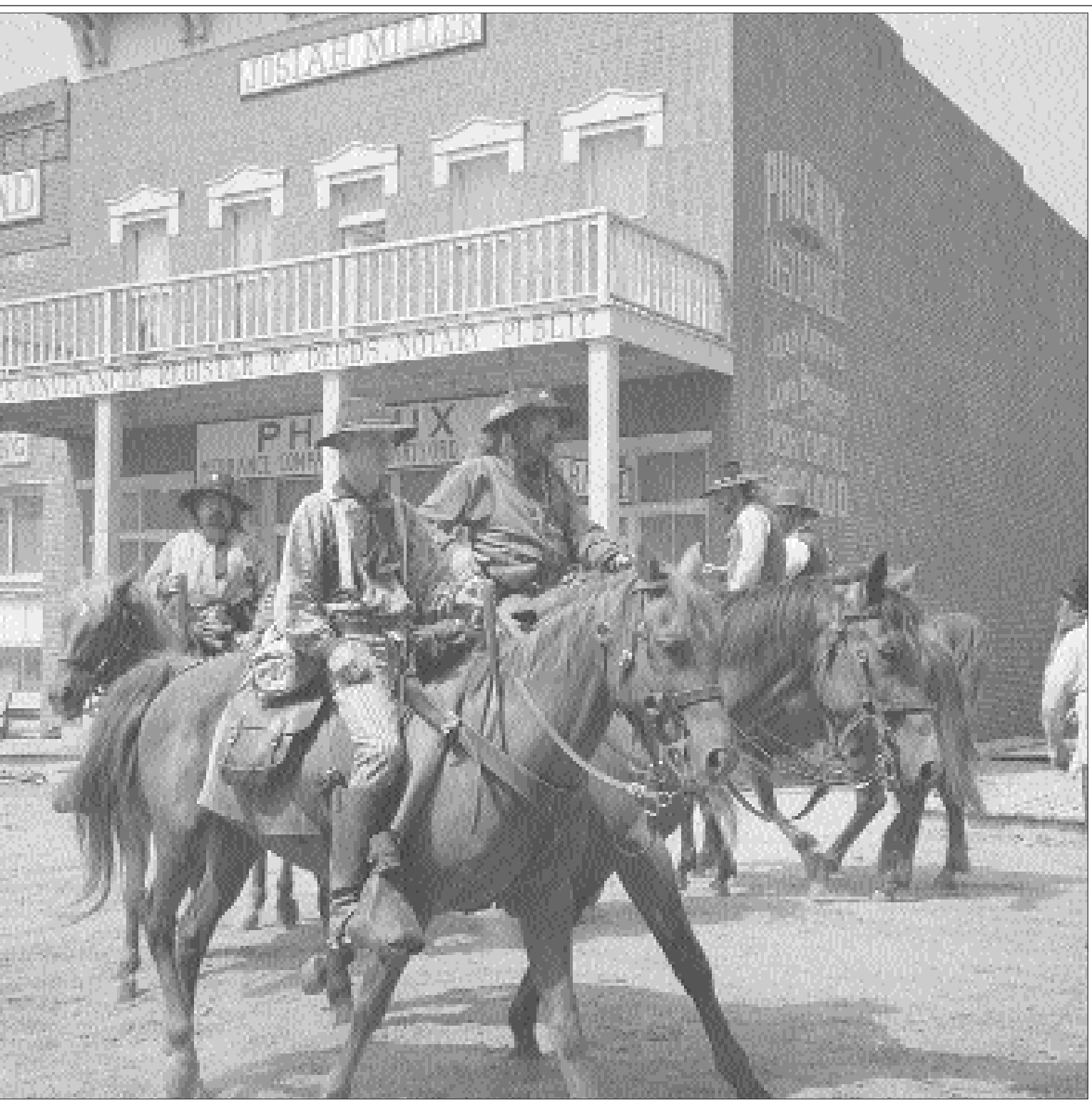
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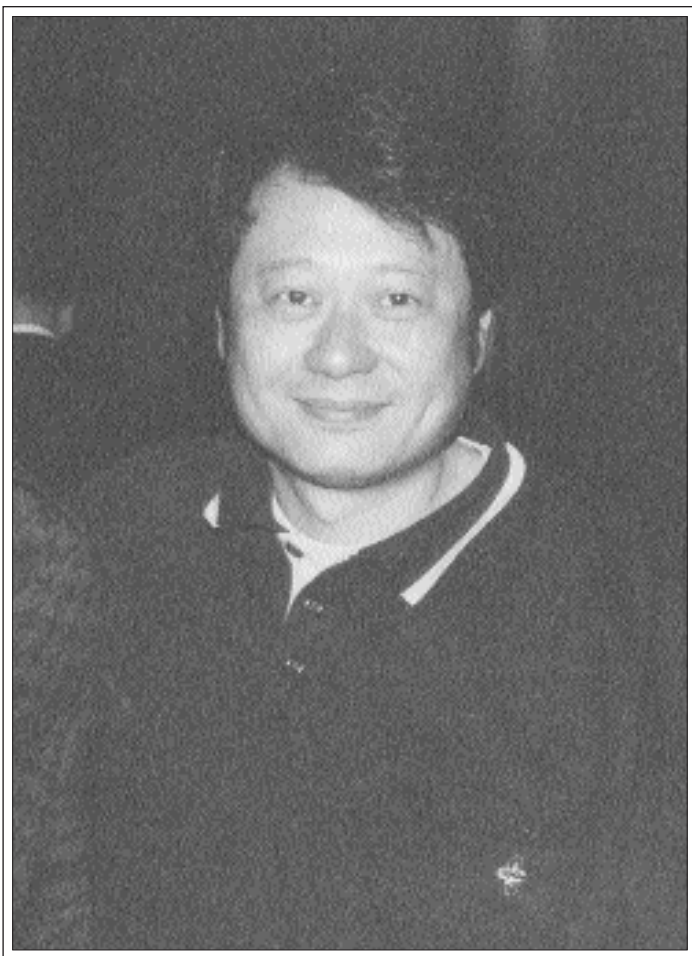
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1. Poem presented to Nannie Dawson, February 26, 1865, reprinted in Duane Schultz, *Quantrill's War: The Life and Times of William Clarke Quantrill, 1837–1865* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 297.





*A scene photographed during the filming of Ang Lee's 1999 film Ride With the Devil.*



Ang Lee, director of *Ride With the Devil*.

Coming to movie theaters in the fall of 1999 is the latest installment in the Quantrill saga, Ang Lee's *Ride With the Devil*. It might seem strange at first that a world-class filmmaker like the Taiwanese American Ang Lee, renowned for family dramas such as *Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1992), and *Sense and Sensibility* (1997)—an artist distinguished for his sensitivity to the conflicts of class, race, and gender in family relationships—should have made this bloody, historical chronicle. “At first I wanted to get away from a family drama and do something with more action and scope,” Lee admitted during a 1998 interview. “But it turns out that this story actually does both. Family values and social systems are tested by war. *Ride With the Devil* is a family drama, but one where the characters also represent a larger kind of ‘family’—the warring factions of the Civil War and the divisions in the national character.”<sup>2</sup>

Less important, perhaps, is our expectation that *Ride with the Devil* will necessarily be any more faithful to the historical record than the films that have preceded it (although indications are that in some details, at least, it will represent controversial aspects of the story hitherto not seen on the screen). Like all storytellers before him, Lee has found in the story of the border wars the links with our present-day contexts. In his meditation on a historical theme, he merely is partaking in a tradition begun long before the birth of the movies.<sup>3</sup>

2. Ang Lee, interview by author, March 24, 1998. For accounts of the filming of *Ride With the Devil* during the spring and summer of 1998 in Kansas City, Lawrence, and Pattensburg, Missouri, see Brian Burnes and Diane Carroll, “Tragedy in 1863 Is Hot Topic Again,” *Kansas City Star*, May 19, 1998; Robert R. Butler, “It’s All Set,” *ibid.*, May 3, 1998; Butler, “1863 Comes Alive As Raiders Ride Again,” *ibid.*, May 14, 1998; Butler, “Can the ‘Devil’ Round ‘em up at the Box Office?” *ibid.*, June 24, 1998; Butler, “‘Ride with the Devil’ Is an Early Winner on the Web,” *ibid.*, November 1, 1998; Todd Cohen, “Reliving Quantrill’s Raid: KU Libraries Play Role in New Movie,” *Oread* 22 (May 8, 1998): 1–2; David Toplikar, “Kansas Sites Being Scouted for Civil War-Era Movie,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 16, 1997.

3. Issues involved in the cinematic interpretation/depiction of history are explored in Robert Brent Toplin, “The Filmmaker as Historian,” *American Historical Review* 93 (December 1988): 1210–27; John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance

Quantrill himself is just the kind of historical phenomenon storytellers dearly love. He gives the tale-teller room to stretch, so to speak. Confusions and myths began swarming around Quantrill even in his own lifetime. Then, as now, he was an elusive character. We are not even sure what he looked like. We know he was almost five feet ten inches in height, of slender build (about 160 pounds), with sandy—or reddish-blond, or light brown—hair. But the authenticity of some surviving portraits has been questioned.<sup>4</sup> A man of many contradictions, he seems to have been equally at home plotting a guerrilla raid as he was teaching English poetry. Claiming he was a colonel in the Confederate Partisan Rangers, he had his picture taken in a colonel's uniform, and signed dispatches with this rank. Yet, as Edward E. Leslie averred in his rigor-

of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," *ibid.*, 1200–9; Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *ibid.*, 1173–85; and Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *ibid.*, 1193–99. Among several recent books on the subject, the following are particularly recommended, in chronological order: John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979); Peter C. Rollins, ed., *Hollywood As Historian* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983); Michael R. Pitts, ed., *Hollywood and American History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1984); Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, *Presenting the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); George MacDonald Fraser, *The Hollywood History of the World* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988); John A. Walker, *Art & Artists on Screen* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1993); Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995); Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Vivian Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

Few treatments of the biographical film, per se, have appeared. See George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Eileen Karsten, *From Real Life to Reel Life: A Filmography of Biographical Films* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993).

Attesting to the fact that the Quantrill movies have received scant attention so far is their noticeable absence in all but one of these texts. The lone exception is Pitts's *Hollywood and American History*, which briefly examined *Dark Command* and *Kansas Raiders*.

4. According to biographer Edward E. Leslie, at least one of Quantrill's best-known images has been retouched with thickened hair and mustache. For a sampling of likenesses, see Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride: The True Story of William Clarke Quantrill and His Confederate Raiders* (New York: Random House, 1996), following 234.

ously researched 1996 study *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, it is doubtful that Quantrill ever received such a commission by any military or governmental authority.<sup>5</sup> He changed his name almost as many times as he opportunistically shifted his political gears and changed his uniforms. For example, Leslie reported that in Lawrence under the name of Charley Hart, Quantrill "had been playing to both sides in the great struggle, to the Free-Soilers and the proslavery crowd, riding with Jayhawkers and with Border Rufians and telling each side he was spying on the other."<sup>6</sup> As Barry A. Crouch's recent article "A 'Fiend in Human Shape?'" points out in detail, several of Quantrill's first biographers, notably John Newman Edwards (*Noted Guerrillas*, 1877) and William Elsey Connelley (*Quantrill and the Border Wars*, 1910), romanticized and demonized him, respectively.<sup>7</sup>

The very title of Ang Lee's *Ride With the Devil* reminds us that it was a whiff of brimstone, particularly, that most fascinated admirers and detractors alike, not just of Quantrill, but of many guerrillas operating on both sides of the state line. Historian Stephen Z. Starr reported, for example, that "strange tales" were told about jayhawker Marshall Cleveland, that he led a "charmed life" and possessed "uncanny prowess" and "superhuman courage and endurance."<sup>8</sup> As for Quantrill and his raiders, Leslie wrote that beginning in late August 1863, shortly after the raid on Lawrence, "one finds startlingly frequent references in letters, diaries, and newspaper articles written by loyal civilians and even in cold Federal military reports to the bushwhackers as 'demons,' 'devils from hell,' and 'fiends incarnate.' In the midst of the Lawrence raid, one brute had brushed aside the pleas

5. Regarding Quantrill's military rank, Leslie reported that "neither Price nor Reynolds gave Quantrill a colonelcy, and there is recently uncovered evidence casting serious doubt on Quantrill's ever having been commissioned a colonel by any military or governmental authority." See Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 270.

6. Schultz, *Quantrill's War*, 55.

7. Barry A. Crouch, "A 'Fiend in Human Shape?'" William Clarke Quantrill and His Biographers," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Summer 1999): 142–56.

8. Stephen Z. Starr, *Jennison's Jayhawkers: A Civil War Cavalry Regiment and Its Commander* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 24.

of a woman, saying, 'We are fiends from hell,' and many accepted the assertion as almost literal, doctrinal truth."<sup>9</sup>

Adding to these demonic associations was the myth that Quantrill's raiders had to swear a "Black Oath," in the names of God and the Devil. Kit Dalton reported later that any violation would incur "an avenging God and an unmerciful devil to tear out my heart and roast it over flames of sulphur."<sup>10</sup> In short, William Clarke Quantrill seems to have been the sort of phantom that poet Lord Byron described in his *Vision of Judgment*:

The moment that you had pronounced him one,  
Presto! His face changed, and he was another;  
And when that change was hardly well put on,  
It varied, till I don't think his own mother  
(If that he had a mother) would her son  
Had known, he shifted so from one to t'other. . . .

Soon after his death in 1865, Quantrill, like Jesse James and Allan Pinkerton, entered the mythical regions of dime novels and movies, becoming a popular paradigm of the "good bad man," the prototype of western heroes to come. "Some of the guerrilla-hero's gifts became hallmarks of the movie-cowboy and gunfighter," wrote historian Richard Slotkin in his classic *Gunfighter Nation*, "his superb horsemanship and love for a favored animal, and his almost fetishistic preference for the pistol as a weapon and his 'preternatural' skill with it." Like Jesse James, Slotkin continued, Quantrill gradually was transformed in the popular consciousness from a local hero into a figure of western and frontier mythology, "the hero of a national myth of resistance."<sup>11</sup>

Quantrill first galloped onto what I call the "celluloid seen" (that is, a visualization of history) in *Quantrell's Son* (1914), a two-reel western. In rapid

succession thereafter he figured in a spate of Jesse James pictures, including *Jesse James Under the Black Flag* (Mescos Pictures, 1921), *Jesse James As the Outlaw* (Mescos Pictures, 1921), and *Jesse James* (Paramount-Lasky, 1927).<sup>12</sup> In these and subsequent films Quantrill is referred to as "Quantrell" in *Quantrell's Son* (1914); "General Quantrell" in William Dieterle's *Red Mountain* (Paramount, 1951); "Will Cantrell" in Raoul Walsh's *Dark Command* (Republic, 1940); "Colonel Quantrill" in Ray Enright's *Kansas Raiders* (Universal, 1950); "Charley Quantrill" in William Witney's *Quantrill and His Raiders* (1954); "Charley Hart" in Edward Bernds' *Quantrill's Raiders* (Allied Artists, 1958); "Luke Darcy" in Melvin Frank's *The Jayhawkers* (Paramount, 1959); and "Bill Quantrill" in Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Warner Bros., 1976).<sup>13</sup> In *Kansas Raiders* he is described as a fiend with "two horns, two hoofs, and a long tail." And in *Dark Command* his mother accuses him of "fighting for the hosts of Darkness [with] the Devil riding beside you."

Significantly, these films, so different in many ways, find consensus in their interpretation of Quantrill as a megalomaniac who attempted to forge a Confederate empire in the West, with Kansas as his seat of power. To what degree the man was motivated by selfish greed, blood lust, revenge, or driven by genuine patriotism, depends on the particular film.

The most overtly political portrait emerges in the erroneously titled *Kansas Raiders* (Quantrill was a Missouri raider by the time he attacked Lawrence), based on a story and screenplay by Robert L. Richards. Quantrill (portrayed by Brian Donlevy), is a tightly wrapped bundle of ambition, egomania, and Southern patriotism. Immaculately attired in his Confederate spangles and braid—the uniform is de-

9. Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 283.

10. Quote in Schultz, *Quantrill's War*, 83–84. Schultz noted that Coleman Younger disputed the authenticity of this oath.

11. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 135–37.

12. For a concise overview of Jesse James movies, see Michael R. Pitts, ed., *Hollywood and American History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1984), 176–79.

13. Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 407, reported that "Quantrell" was the preferred spelling of Quantrill's Missouri admirers. Quantrill first used the name "Charley Hart" in 1858 when he signed on at Fort Leavenworth as a teamster with a U.S. Army expedition headed for Utah. He continued to use the name while living in Lawrence in 1860.





In the 1950 film *Kansas Raiders*, Audie Murphy as Jesse James (right) tries to show some mercy to a defender of Lawrence during the raid.

scribed by one character as looking as if “it came right out of a storefront window”—he is consumed with ambitions to bring the Civil War to the western territories. In a key scene he outlines his so-called “grand strategy” for defeating the Unionist forces: now that the Northern navies control the seas, he explains, it is necessary to fall back and bring the battle to the West. “When Lee eventually realizes the hopelessness of his present position, where’s he gonna go? Here, to the West. It may take months, even years, but here he can bide his time, gather his strength for that great counterattack that’ll drive the Union Army into the sea.” By that time Quantrill will have risen to a position of power second only to Lee himself. “It’s our great task, our glorious cause, our gateway to immortal fame. Let’s drink to it!” He is joined in his efforts by the brothers James, Dalton, and Younger. Quickly rising to the position of his chief lieutenant is young Jesse James (played by Audie Murphy). He

and Quantrill establish a mutual, if grudging respect—a kind of father-son relationship—even if Jesse disagrees with Quantrill’s brutally violent tactics. “Do you think it’s by choice that I lead this rabble?” responds Quantrill. “Do you think I condone their brutality any more than you do? General Lee needs me, and through me he needs you.”

*Kansas Raiders*, by the way, is the only Quantrill film that depicts the participation of the Younger, James, and Dalton brothers in Quantrill’s guerrilla band. However, it is not historically verifiable that Jesse James rode with Quantrill at this time. He may have tried to join Quantrill in the summer before the Lawrence raid (his brother Frank had been with Quantrill since May 1863), but because he was only fifteen, it is likely he was rejected.<sup>14</sup>

14. It is true that several first-hand accounts allege Jesse was in Lawrence, but Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 186, refuted this: “Decades later, after Jesse had become famous, some Lawrence survivors would manufacture tales of having encountered him, wild and cruel, dur-

In *Dark Command*, *The Jayhawkers*, and *Red Mountain*, Quantrill's avowed politics are but thin disguises for his selfishness and greed. *Dark Command* was adapted by Grover Jones, Lionel Houser, and F. Hugh Herbert from William R. Burnett's 1938 novel. Burnett cast Quantrill as "Polk Cantrell," and the town of Lawrence as "Provost, Kansas," a "vast collection of wooden houses strung along wide but dusty streets [where] the morning sun beat pitilessly down on the almost treeless streets and plaza; the people looked ill-dressed and rather dejected, and even the dogs seemed to slink."<sup>15</sup> Cantrell is not a schoolteacher, as was the real Quantrill, but a politician. He is an intelligent but thoroughly ruthless sociopath who avoids ideological sides in the border wars struggle. "[It's] every man for himself," Cantrell declares to his friend Johnny Seton. "The Missourians rush the border and burn the Free-Soilers' towns, and when they go back, the Free-Soilers take after them and burn their towns."<sup>16</sup> The local citizenry regard Cantrell's guerrillas as "demons" and Cantrell himself as "Old Nick." A lawyer pronounces him a dangerous man: "He's a man of no principles whatever. . . . Our worst people are making a hero of him. . . . He likes chaos. It's his natural element."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, he is a man affecting a certain outsized style and appearance: "He had on a big white flat-crowned hat and the uniform coat of a Confederate officer. There was a red sash under his gun-belt, and his chest was covered with medals and gold braid. Enormous epaulets made his shoulders look broader than they were."<sup>18</sup>

ing the raid, [but] Jesse was tending a tobacco crop that August and did not become a guerrilla until the following summer, when he joined Anderson's band." *Kansas Raiders*, moreover, contends that the attack on the James farm by Pinkerton men motivated Jesse to join the guerrillas. "We found the house burning," Jesse tells Quantrill in *Kansas Raiders*, "my ma with her arm shot off, my pa hanging from a tree in the front yard. It was Red Legs. Yankee guerrillas. . . . I came here because I wanted to kill every man I could find that would do a thing like that." The burning of the James farm did indeed occur shortly before the Lawrence raid.

15. W.R. Burnett, *The Dark Command* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1938), 107.

16. *Ibid.*, 44.

17. *Ibid.*, 113–14.

18. *Ibid.*, 351. Other books by Burnett with western subjects included *Saint Johnson* (New York: Dial Press, 1930), in which he fictionalized

In the film adaptation Polk Cantrell becomes "Will Cantrell" (portrayed by Walter Pidgeon), an idealistic schoolteacher in Lawrence whose motivations in donning Confederate gray arise entirely from frustration over losing the Lawrence sheriff's election and the loss of the affections of his girlfriend—both to his rival, now called Bob Seton (played by John Wayne), a Texan with mildly free-state sympathies. "I'm through with books and teaching," whines Cantrell. "I'll burn every book in this house. . . . First chance I have to be somebody, I get beaten out of it by an ignorant cowhand who can't even write his name. I can write my name, and I'm going to write it across this territory in letters of fire and blood." And later, after leading a campaign of terror against his enemies, he tells his estranged girlfriend Mary (portrayed by Claire Trevor), "I regret nothing I've done and I'll do it again. I'll plunder a dozen states to get you and keep you." He abandons any pretense of ideological loyalties in a remarkable speech to his raiders, delivered at the outbreak of the Civil War:

This will not be a war of short duration, as some people think. It will be as deadly and as fiercely fought as any civil war in history. Now, you men have thrown your loyalty to me; and your loyalty will be amply rewarded. You're not fighting for the North, and you're not fighting for the South. But you're fighting to take what's coming to you. The fine gentlemen of Kansas and Missouri will be fighting each other in a war we don't want any part of. And the longer they keep each other busy, the better we're going to like it. We're going to live off the fat of the land; and what we don't want, we'll burn.

In capturing the essential lawlessness and amorality of Burnett's character of Cantrell, the filmmakers have, perhaps in spite of themselves, hit close

the shootout at the O.K. Corral. It came to the screen in 1932 under the title *Law and Order*, starring Walter Huston as Frame Johnson (modeled after Wyatt Earp) and Harry Carey as Ed Brandt (modeled after Doc Holliday). See Ken Mate and Pat McGilligan, "Burnett," *Film Comment* 19 (February 1983): 58–68.

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to the mark of Quantrill's violently opportunistic nature. At the same time, it is worth noting that *Dark Command* is the only Quantrill film that touches on his activities as a schoolteacher. Even though he never taught in Lawrence, he was indeed a teacher in other places and purportedly a good one. However, he had no great love for the profession; he was too restless and the pay was too low.<sup>19</sup>

In *The Jayhawkers*, scripted by Melvin Frank, Joseph Petracca, Frank Fenton, and A.I. Bezzerides, Quantrill is an enigmatic adventurer named Luke Darcy (played by Jeff Chandler) who opportunistically rides as a bushwhacker or a jayhawker, depending upon the situation. Literate, articulate, and well versed in the classics, he is a self-proclaimed "Napoleon of the Plains" who is determined to stand apart from the issues dividing North and South and devote his energies to conquering "the country of Kansas" to become its "Emperor." His strategy is to pillage towns with troops disguised as Missouri guerrillas, then to ride in as a freestater to offer protection to the bewildered citizenry. "I take the little towns one by one and get the people to like me," he explains to his lieutenant, Cam Bleeker (portrayed by Fess Parker). "I always make sure they need me. Before I come into a town, it's hit and hit hard by Missouri red legs. I make sure of that, because they are my own men wearing different outfits. When I move in with my Jayhawkers, I'm a big strong daddy come to protect them against the nasty raiders. And believe me, I don't have to take their town, they hand it to me."

In sum, *The Jayhawkers* is a bizarre concatenation of windy rhetoric, distorted history, and homoerotic tensions. Aside from the brief reference to Kansas as a battleground between Northern and Southern forces, the film contains little political discussion. In-

19. After graduating from high school in 1854 at the age of sixteen, he taught the lower grades at a school in his native Canal Dover, Ohio. Later positions in his sporadic teaching career included posts in the Blicktown district (just south of Dover); Mendota, Illinois; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Salt Lake City; and in the Stanton Township, Lykins County (present Miami County), Kansas.

deed, the landscape is curiously devoid of armed forces representative of either side. Only Darcy's troops are in evidence, and they are dressed as bushwhackers and jayhawkers, according to the advantages of a given situation. Adding to the confusion are several references to Darcy's jayhawkers donning red leggings to disguise themselves as Missouri, rather than Kansas, guerrillas (obviously a mistake by the writers). Although he is identified as a jayhawker, he is as much a bushwhacker—hence he is essentially a Quantrill-like character. Meanwhile, Darcy spends most of his time making vague promises to the conquered townspeople ("We will build our land, strong and beautiful"), insulting women ("To me, a woman is like a wine, when it's over and there's nothing left in the bottle you must throw it away."), dispensing dime-store philosophies ("To kill and to feel, you cannot use a gun."), and currying the attentions of his friend Bleeker ("I killed . . . for you. It isn't sentiment, it's the way I feel.") Indeed, the story's dramatic climax does not concern so much the apprehension and death of Darcy, but the mounting erotic tension—call it a kind of frontier *menage a trois*—among Darcy, Bleeker, and Bleeker's girlfriend Jeanne (portrayed by Nicole Maurey). "You can't be true to both of us," Darcy tells Bleeker at the end, "not to Jeanne and me. Don't worry about me. I got what I want. I got Kansas."

The "General Quantrell" (played by John Ireland) of *Red Mountain*—scripted by John Meredyth Lucas, George F. Slavin, and George W. George—has fled Kansas after the Lawrence massacre and come westward to Colorado Territory in 1865 with plans to recruit Native American tribes into a "Confederacy of Plains Indians." Clad in Union blue to allay the suspicions of any Union troops in the area, he declares, "The South is dead. When the war is over the Union will be too exhausted to fight another. We have a whole western empire in our grasp if we have the vision to see it." The reality, however, as his lieutenant Brent Sherwood (portrayed by Alan Ladd) comes to learn, is a different matter. Quantrell is motivated





Walter Pidgeon (center) as "Will Cantrell" engages in slave trading in the 1940 film *Dark Command*.

purely by selfish greed. "The Confederacy is dead," he later admits. "We have loyalties only to the living."

*Red Mountain*, like *Kansas Raiders*, speculates that Quantrill's military ambitions lay in a westward direction. However, at least in the waning months of the Civil War, the real-life Quantrill's movements were directed either southward to Texas or eastward to Kentucky. His experiences in the West were confined to the pre-Civil War years.

Two more films, *Quantrill and His Raiders* and *Quantrill's Raiders*, are cheaply made "B" programmers that reduce Quantrill to a pulp fiction stock villain useful only as a cardboard foil to the heroics of leading men Jim Davis and Steve Cochran, respectively.<sup>20</sup> In the former, Quantrill (played by Bruce Bennett) is a man who, in the words of a lieutenant, "is using the Civil War as an excuse to write his personal history in blood." He divides his time between se-

20. William K. Everson, *Pictorial History of the Western* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1969), 210.

ducing female Union spies and sneering at the free-state cause. In *Quantrill's Raiders*, scripted by Polly James, Quantrill's allegiance to the Southern cause is revealed to be merely a cover for his own blood lusts and sexual appetites. "[He] wasn't an outlaw to start," explains a Lawrence civic leader. "He taught school here, and we all liked him. Now, about that time [we] were helping slaves escape from Missouri. Hart said he wanted to help, that he was all for the Union. But he really wanted to do was to betray our setup to Southern bushwhackers. I don't understand how men can play both sides." When he is ordered by Confederate general Sterling Price to destroy the Union arsenal in Lawrence without any "wanton killings," he obstinately declares: "I'll take everything I can lay my hands on. I'll kill every Yankee in my path. Lawrence! Take a good look at it . . . while it's still on the map."<sup>21</sup>

21. In view of the cardboard melodrama and cheesy aspect of *Quantrill's Raiders*, it should perhaps come as no surprise to note that di-

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When Quantrill and a force of an estimated 440 men rode into the city of Lawrence, Kansas, on the morning of August 21, 1863, he surprised a city in its sleep. Encountering little resistance, he plundered and burned the town in a matter of hours, killing an estimated two hundred men and boys. First to die were the inexperienced soldiers too young for active duty (none of whom had weapons) camped on the west side of New Hampshire Street. Next were the citizens who fell to the detachments of raiders patrolling Mount Oread, the roads leading out of town, and the streets of Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire. Quantrill himself led the charge down Massachusetts and into the lobby of the Eldridge House. As historian Duane Schultz wrote in *Quantrill's War*, Quantrill "was back doing what he did best. He watched it all from his perch on the second-floor landing. It was the supreme moment of his life. He was back in the town that had wronged him, the place he hated more than any other, and at that moment, he owned it and everyone in it. One word from him and any man would die before he could open his mouth in protest."<sup>22</sup>

Examining the many motivations behind Quantrill's raid on Lawrence is well beyond the scope of this article.<sup>23</sup> Beyond any personal grudges that Quantrill may have harbored against the town, it is sufficient here to note that Lawrence represented everything the pro-Southern forces despised: it was a free-state bastion, a center of jayhawker activity, an important new home for contrabands fleeing their Missouri masters, a recruiting center for Union troops, and, not least, the home of the hated Senator James H. Lane, who in 1861 had led a raid on the town of Osceola, Missouri.<sup>24</sup> And it was precisely at

rector Edward Bernds was best known for his direction of several entries in the *Blondie* and *Bowery Boys* movie series. After helming *Quantrill's Raiders*, Bernds went on to direct the camp science fiction classic *Queen of Outer Space* (1958).

22. Schultz, *Quantrill's War*, 172–73.

23. For detailed analyses, see Thomas Goodrich, *Bloody Dawn: The Story of the Lawrence Massacre* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), 1–8; Crouch, "A 'Fiend in Human Shape?'" 152–54.

24. Senator Lane incurred the undying enmity of the bushwhackers when on September 22, 1861, he and an army of fifteen hundred jay-

hawkers attacked the town of Osceola, Missouri, scattering a tiny band of rebels, looting its stores, and torching its buildings. Lane carried the plunder back to Lawrence.

this time that Quantrill gained badly needed support for the Lawrence raid from his guerrilla chieftains William T. "Bloody Bill" Anderson and Coleman Younger, whose kin had been killed during their recent incarceration in a Kansas City jail on suspicion of collusion with the bushwhackers. Later in October, after weeks spent eluding his pursuers, Quantrill and his band moved on to Baxter Springs, Kansas, where they slaughtered ninety-eight men of the personal escort and headquarters train of Major General James G. Blunt. After a disastrous sojourn in Texas, where he was deposed as the guerrillas' leader, Quantrill ended up in Kentucky in early 1865, with vague plans to lead his remaining band of men to Washington to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. After a series of skirmishes and near-misses with federal authorities, he was ambushed at a farm near Taylorsville, Kentucky, by a detachment of specially deployed guerrillas under the command of "Captain" Edwin Terrill. Quantrill died from bullet wounds to the spine on June 6, 1865, at the age of twenty-seven.<sup>25</sup>

Or did he? Significantly, Quantrill's celebrity ensured a kind of immortality. At various times in subsequent decades, he was reported to be hiding out in Chile, raising cattle in Mexico, teaching in Arizona, trapping in British Columbia, and investing in real estate on the island of Maui. One legend even held that he had become a Methodist minister in Alabama, where he concealed six-guns under his coat and performed feats of marksmanship at church picnics!

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Quantrill movies offer radically differing versions of the Lawrence raid and Quantrill's demise. About all they have in common is that, with one exception, they depict the raid as a relatively bloodless affair. There are reasons for that, which are examined later in this article. Only *Kansas Raiders* is made of tougher stuff. The raid is well staged by second-unit directors Yakima Canutt and Cliff Lyons. At the report of

25. Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 364–69.

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Quantrill's revolver, the raiders charge down a hill into town in broad daylight and meet the resistance of a few Union troops. After an exciting montage sequence of gunshots, plunging hoofs, and falling bodies, an old woman rushes into the street shrieking, "Murderers!" and crouches over the body of her dead husband. Jesse James, in the meantime, is relieving the Lawrence bank of its money—executing, the film implies, the first daylight bank robbery in American history.<sup>26</sup> Later, while an angry Jesse accuses Quantrill of allowing his men to shoot unarmed civilians, the sudden arrival of Union troops forces the gang to flee. A disillusioned Jesse stays by Quantrill's side after he is blinded in a gunfight with pursuing troops. Holed up in a cabin, surrounded by troops, he refuses Quantrill's orders to leave him behind. Quantrill suddenly pushes Jesse out the door to safety and bars it behind him. Then, dressed in his military uniform, he proudly marches out to confront his captors, who promptly shoot him dead. As Jesse and the Youngers and the Daltons ride away, a concluding title card informs us, "And so, into the pages of crime history rode five young men . . . Five whose warped lives were to be a heritage from their teacher, William Clarke Quantrill."

In the other films, the history of the raid and its aftermath goes even more awry. In *Dark Command* Cantrell's guerrillas meets stiff resistance from a heavily armed citizenry. As the raiders and defenders exchange fusillades, Cantrell decides he has better things to do and goes in search of his ex-girlfriend (the woman, you will recall, who was successfully wooed away from him by John Wayne). Instead, he finds none other than the severe, black-clad figure of his mother (played by Marjorie Main in her pre-"Ma and Pa Kettle" days), rifle in hand, come to exterminate him like some vile pestilence.<sup>27</sup> "I borned a dirty,

26. Nice try, but Jesse's first daylight bank robbery actually transpired nearly three years later in Liberty, Missouri, on February 13, 1866, at the Clay County Savings Association.

27. This did not happen, of course. Quantrill never saw his mother after a visit to Canal Dover, Ohio, in 1856. Their relationship was one of mutual affection—hardly the deadly antagonism depicted in *Dark Command*—and she claimed to know nothing about the years of his later no-

murdering snake that's broke my heart to see it crawlin' along," she rages. "I curse the day I had you." But before she can fire, John Wayne comes forward to deliver the fatal shot. "You're at the end of the road," she whispers to the dying Cantrell, "and the Devil's beside you, waitin'." All the while, no one is apparently unduly alarmed that Lawrence is burning to the ground.<sup>28</sup> Viewing the devastation, John Wayne chirps, "We got a saying down in Texas that it takes a good fire to burn down the weeds. It lets the flowers grow."<sup>29</sup>

Some of the scenes of the Lawrence raid from *Dark Command* are recycled for *Quantrill and His Raiders*. Here, too, the town is warned in advance and is able to turn away the guerrillas. Quantrill, now declared an outlaw by the Confederacy, is pursued to the Wakefield Ranch in Kentucky, where he is mortally wounded in a gunfight. Curiously, this is the only film that depicts his demise in circumstances within shouting distance of the historical record.

*Red Mountain's* story, as previously indicated, begins after the Lawrence massacre (which is alluded to only twice in the dialogue). As we already know, "General Quantrell" has fled westward to Colorado Territory. And it is here that good-guy Alan Ladd dispatches him after a rugged hand-to-hand fight.

tority. Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 63, wrote, "Long after his death, his mother will insist that she does not know what has become of him and will have to visit his grave and see his skull before acknowledging that the deceased, infamous guerrilla and her beloved, devoted son are one and the same."

28. History repeated itself for *Dark Command's* world premiere in Lawrence, Kansas, on April 4, 1940. Fifteen thousand citizens gathered in South Park, along with the film's featured players (including John Wayne, Gabby Hayes, Claire Trevor, and Walter Pidgeon) to see a reenactment of the raid and the burning of a replica of the Eldridge House. See Roscoe Born, "Stars Invade City," *University Daily Kansan*, April 4, 1940; Emory Frank Scott, "The Dark Command," in *One Hundred Years of Lawrence Theatres* (Lawrence, Kans.: Douglas County Historical Society, 1995).

29. This ending is a signal departure not only from the book but from Burnett's original novel, wherein Cantrell's raiders meet little resistance in Lawrence. They mow down the sleeping soldiers, shoot the defenseless citizenry, and loot and burn the town: "All concerted firing had ceased. From time to time a ragged volley sounded in a distant part of town, and there was faint, sporadic yelling, but the worst was over. Smoke was rolling up over the town, higher and higher, blotting out the sun. Ashes were falling all around. The downtown section was practically destroyed." See Burnett, *The Dark Command*, 355. Quantrill then flees the rescuing cavalry only to be killed later by his nemesis, Johnny Seton.



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*Quantrill's Raiders* enjoys the dubious distinction of being the only Quantrill picture in which Lawrence, Kansas, emerges completely unscathed from the raid. The citizenry are so well prepared and so heavily armed that they turn away the small band of raiders with little effort. Quantrill's puny forces have been reduced from four hundred riders to twenty-five—doubtless a reflection of the film's limited budget. It is a distressing turn of events, not just because it is a blatant nose-thumbing at history but because it defeats the reasonable expectation of any self-respecting movie fan to enjoy a "big finish." What we do have is decidedly anti-climactic—the sight of a twitching, cowardly Quantrill, cornered and shot dead in the Lawrence street by his nemesis, Westcott (played by Steve Cochran).

What emerges from these films is a collective portrait that reveals as much about the life and times of Hollywood—and the particular circumstances surrounding each film—as it does about the infernal enigma of the man himself. The depiction of the Lawrence raid in *Quantrill and His Raiders* and *Quantrill's Raiders*, for example—with recycled film footage from *Dark Command* in the former and the reduction of the massacre to a minor skirmish in the latter—reveals all too painfully the shortcomings of the "B" picture as it declined in the 1950s. The standard western formulas and stereotypes were growing tired through repetition. Moreover, the cheap budgets enforced cost-cutting procedures, as historian William K. Everson wrote:

The old-time outlaw gang had now shrunk to a



Jeff Chandler as "Luke Darcy" (second from right), accompanied by Fess Parker (right), saddles up to ride on another raid in *The Jayhawkers*, a 1959 film.



mere three riders; running inserts were always shot on the same stretches of road and cut in regardless of the other locales in use; studio exteriors got skimpier, with a few papier-mâché rocks, a bush or two, and much back-projection substituting for decent art-direction. In order to minimize the number of camera set-ups and speed production, dialogue scenes were shot in long uninterrupted takes, without change of angle, camera position, or interpolated close-ups to add variety or dramatic emphasis.<sup>30</sup>

As genre historian Rick Altman noted, this state of affairs in the production of genre films, like westerns—and we might editorially insert the cycle of Quantrill movies as a subgenre of the western—marks a sort of saturation point, leaving studios facing the choice of either repeating more “B” productions, handling westerns differently, or abandoning them entirely.<sup>31</sup>

*Dark Command* skirts the real issues of the Civil War and the complex motivations behind the Lawrence raid because, in part, of the time period in which it was released: 1940 was hardly a propitious time to dissect the realities of a divided Union. Instead, as Allen Eyles, John Wayne’s biographer, has pointed out, the film foregrounds the conflict between the tough man of action (Wayne) and the vacillating, intellectual Cantrell because of certain presumptions about the temper of the film’s intended audience at the time: “The film mirrors what it believes to be mass-audience mistrust of deep thinkers,” writes Eyles, “and supports the man who has the right feelings, the right instincts”—a timely message for an America poised uncertainly between isolationist and interventionist policies toward the European conflict.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, *Kansas Raiders*, like another film re-



Leo Gordon as Quantrill appears to have things on his mind other than the border wars in the 1958 film *Quantrill's Raiders*.

30. Everson, *A Pictorial History of the Western*, 210.

31. Altman argued that this process may lead to the creation of a new genre altogether: “Though this does not necessarily guarantee the creation of a new genre, it always recreates the circumstances out of which new genres are generated. At this point, then, the entire process has the potential to begin again.” See Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 62.

32. Allen Eyles, *John Wayne* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1979), 63.

leased a few months later, John Huston's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), exhibits a decidedly post-war sensibility that questions and indicts the sacrifice of young men victimized by the circumstances and brutality of war. Outmoded authoritarian codes of behavior (Quantrill's) are questioned, as we have seen, by his young followers (the James brothers), themselves representative of a new, emerging generation just then finding its voice. Indeed, the casting of young Audie Murphy, a recently decorated war hero, and veteran actor Brian Donlevy, a holdover from Hollywood's "golden era," in a father-son dynamic, reinforces this generational conflict. (Surely it is no accident that barely a year later Murphy was cast in *The Red Badge of Courage*.)

*Red Mountain* and *The Jayhawkers* also are typical of their time. *Red Mountain* is the only Quantrill film to depict in any detail Quantrill's relationship with Native Americans, although in this respect it is off the mark.<sup>33</sup> But his treacherous exploitation of the Ute tribes serves to place the film in line with a wave of revisionist films in the early 1950s regarding the white man's corruption of Native Americans. The years 1949–1951, in particular, marked a pronounced shift in post-war attitudes toward Hollywood's hitherto negative depiction of Native Americans.<sup>34</sup>

*The Jayhawkers* dispenses with history and politics altogether to concentrate on the dynamics so typical of the psychologically self-conscious "problem" westerns emerging in the late 1950s—like substituting sexual confusion and psychological aberration for

the standard "shoot-'em-up" elements. It belongs to a series of "psychological westerns" that emerged in the late 1940s and continued throughout the 1950s reflecting a post-war, essentially revisionist attitude toward stereotypical western formulas.<sup>35</sup>

Not to be forgotten is the specter of 1950s Cold War paranoia that lurks behind the cardboard facades of most of these films. Their essentially conservative, right-leaning critique of Quantrill's dreams of establishing an empire of the West, particularly as depicted in *Kansas Raiders*, *Red Mountain*, and *The Jayhawkers*, places these films on the same shelf with other movies of the day that attacked political despots (*All the King's Men*, 1949), media demagogues (*A Face in the Crowd*, 1957), and agitprop revolutionaries (*Viva Zapata!*, 1952). Hollywood's image of Quantrill as fascist demagogue and/or grasping imperialist (depending upon how you choose to regard it) finds little support in the historical record.<sup>36</sup> Although admittedly the Quantrill films are not as important or well known as these other movies (and noticeably absent from most discussions of the subject), they nonetheless were deployed to support—or at least reflect—the general *zeitgeist* of America's disillusionment with recently deposed fascist regimes; and at the same time they signified the general public's growing distrust of post-war Stalinist totalitarianism.

In the final analysis, these films were made under the supervision of the watchdog Motion Picture Production Code, which, with many state censor boards and religious pressure groups such as the Catholic Legion of Decency, held Hollywood in its thrall from 1934 to the mid-1960s.<sup>37</sup> The resulting "celluloid seen"

33. Quantrill's experiences with Native Americans were quite different from anything depicted in *Red Mountain*. They included a few skirmishes during his prospecting days in Colorado Territory and on the Kansas plains in 1859, when he and his party of gold seekers were repeatedly attacked by Indians; a handful of horse trading deals in and around the Lawrence area in 1860; and a short time in 1861 spent riding with a company of Cherokees (Confederate sympathizers), when he "undoubtedly learned some tactics from them that would serve him well after he became a guerrilla chieftain." See Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 82.

34. Other directly contemporaneous examples include *Broken Arrow*, *Cherokee Uprising*, *Comanche Territory*, and *Devil's Doorway*. Michael Hilger, *The American Indian in Film* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 85, wrote: "Although these films mark a growth of awareness in the portrayal of Indians . . . sympathy doesn't give way to real empathy."

35. *I Shot Jesse James* (1949), *High Noon* (1952), *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958), and *One-Eyed Jacks* (1959–1961) are only a few of many examples. See Everson, *A Pictorial History of the Western*, 201–21.

36. According to Steven Jansen, director of the Watkins Community Museum of History in Lawrence, Quantrill left no written testaments to this effect, and his actions do not bespeak such political ambitions. See Steven Jansen, interview by author, July 28, 1999. For a brief overview of Cold War films, see John C. Tibbetts, "After the Fall: Revisioning the Cold War," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 18 (March 1998): 111–22. For two recent book-length studies, see Joyce A. Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998); Toni A. Perrine, *Film and the Nuclear Age: Representing Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

is Hollywood history—a film that, in the words of historian Mark C. Carnes, is so sanitized, “so morally unambiguous, so devoid of tedious complexity, so perfect.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, like all other films of that time, the Quantrill films had to avoid radical political discussion; sidestep controversies in religion, race and gender; and minimize graphic sex and violence. Under the circumstances, how could anybody reasonably expect the bloody Quantrill saga to reach the screen intact, with anything approaching its grim brutality and complexity? And who really cared how much of the historical record would have to be sacrificed in the process?

Critics knew this. Audiences knew this. They were complicit in regarding the screen with a kind of knowing wink—as if to say, “Yes, we know this is not an authentic document, but is it not a great story?” This helps explain why the critical reception of these films seems astonishingly charitable to today’s more jaundiced eyes. “Nobody cares about history when making—or seeing—a Western film,” sardonically noted *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther after viewing *Red Mountain*. Instead, he continued, “The question is how many Indians or cowboys or what-not are killed and how much muscular action takes place within a given length of time.”<sup>39</sup> The critic for *Variety* applauded the technicolor photography of *Kansas Raiders* and the exciting Lawrence raid while only mildly deploring its “whitewash” of Quantrill and Jesse James.<sup>40</sup> Crowther chose to ignore the absurdities of *Dark Command*’s ending, praising instead its “fights and shootings, clashes of armed horsemen in the night, a bit of sweet loving in the cool of the evening, and a grand finale when Lawrence is burned by Cantrell’s boys.”<sup>41</sup> *The Jayhawkers*, accord-

ing to *Variety*, reduces “an intriguing and little explored subject” into a “conventional narrative of love and revenge”; but at least it compensates with “handsome pictorial values” and “an amount of dynamic interest” in Jeff Chandler’s portrayal of Luke Darcy.<sup>42</sup> And after complaining about the distortions in the depiction of the Lawrence raid in *Quantrill’s Raiders* (“The famous Quantrill raid on Lawrence, Kansas, when more than 400 towns-people were killed by many hundreds of the guerrilla’s men, is reduced to a simple attack on the town by less than two dozen raiders, and instead of citizens meeting death, here it’s Quantrill, who actually went on to further raiding”), the *Variety* critic goes on to praise the film as a “well plotted. . . tight, showmanly piece of filmmaking” that makes it “probably the best yet of films on this guerrilla leader.”<sup>43</sup>

**B**y contrast with earlier Quantrill films, Ang Lee’s *Ride with the Devil* is now in a position to be the first film to tackle the border wars and the Lawrence raid with at least some measure of ideological and racial complexity, delivered with a considerable dose of blunt and graphic violence. It was adapted by Ang Lee and James Schamus from Missouri author Daniel Woodrell’s 1987 novel *Woe to Live On*, which in turn was an expanded version of his prize-winning 1983 short story.<sup>44</sup> It is the story of nineteen-year-old Jake Roedel, a second-generation German American who rides under the “black flag” of the First Kansas Irregulars. From Jake’s pro-Southern perspective—his distinctive voice provides the first-person narration—the “enemies” are the federals, described as “killer dupes from up the country two or more states away,” whose presence “freed ma-

37. A particularly valuable recent study of the Motion Picture Production Code can be found in Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

38. Carnes, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, 9.

39. Bosley Crowther, “Red Mountain,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1952, 19: 2.

40. “Kansas Raiders,” *Variety*, November 8, 1950, reprinted in *Variety’s Film Reviews*, vol. 7 (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1983).

41. Bosley Crowther, “Dark Command,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1940, 15: 2.

42. “The Jayhawkers,” *Variety*, October 21, 1959, reprinted in *Variety’s Film Reviews*, vol. 10.

43. “Quantrill’s Raiders,” *ibid.*, May 7, 1958, reprinted in *Variety’s Film Reviews*, vol. 9.

44. Daniel Woodrell, *Woe to Live On* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1987). The short story “Woe to Live On” was published in George E. Murphy Jr., ed., *The Editors’ Choice: New American Stories*, vol. 1 (New York: Bantam Books, 1985). All quotations are from the novel.





*Of all the Quantrill films, only Kansas Raiders depicts the fury of the raid on Lawrence. In this photo Brian Donlevy (right) as Quantrill prepares for that fateful attack.*

niac Jayhawkers to ravage about the countryside, taking all of value back to Kansas with them."<sup>45</sup> Jake also distrusts the jayhawkers' antislavery ideals: "Jayhawkers said they raided to free slaves, but mostly they freed horseflesh from riders, furniture from houses, cattle from pastures, precious jewelry from family troves and wives from husbands. Sometimes they had so much plunder niggers were needed to haul it, so they took a few along. This, they said, made them abolitionists."<sup>46</sup>

During many skirmishes and guerrilla raids on both sides of the state line, from 1861 to 1863 Jake encounters a full measure of the horrors of war. Accompanied by his friend, Daniel Holt, an ex-slave, he joins up with Quantrill—described by Jake as "a girl-

ish man in appearance, with fine features and heavy-lidded eyes [who] killed in bulk and at every opportunity."<sup>47</sup> The raiders, who also include in their number Kit Dalton, Frank James, and Coleman Younger, attack Lawrence. Jake is dismayed to find an undefended town: "There were no legions of soldiers to be found and damned few Jayhawkers were at home. I had come here, as had these other rebels, for a desperate fight, but there wasn't one to be had. It was only bad-luck citizens finding out just how bad luck can be."<sup>48</sup> Sickened and disillusioned, Jake and Holt return to Missouri. They decide to strike out west. Facing a new life, Jake soliloquizes:

I knew it to my bones that my world had shifted,

45. Woodrell, *Woe to Live On*, 49.

46. *Ibid.*, 38.

47. *Ibid.*, 160.

48. *Ibid.*, 169.



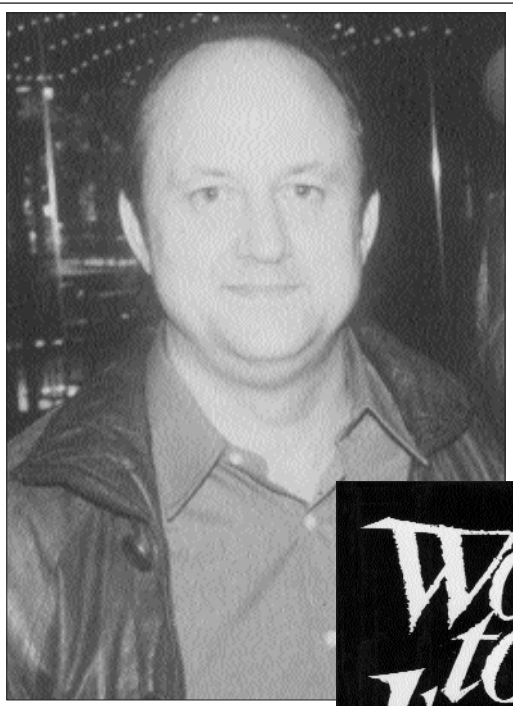
as it always shifts, and that a better orbit had taken hold of me. I had us steered toward a new place to live, and we went for it, this brood of mine and my dark comrade, Holt. This new spot for life might be but a short journey as a winged creature covers it, that is often said, but oh, Lord, as you know, I had not the wings, and it is a hot, hard ride by road.<sup>49</sup>

Author Daniel Woodrell's emphasis on the hues of red and black—embodied in the jayhawkers' red leggings and the bushwhackers' black flag—invariably suggests the color symbolism of another novel depicting a sick, war-torn age, Marie Henri Beyle Stendhal's classic *The Red and the Black* (1830). Stendhal's doomed hero, Julien Sorel, like Jake, was likewise conflicted between the "red" (in this case, the glory of warlike Napoleon), and the "black" (the spiritual values of the Church). Both young men choose to follow the "black," only to find to their dismay that distinctions between the two contrasting ways of life ultimately vanish in the face of the senseless bigotry, hate, and slaughter overwhelming them both.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Woodrell's story, like Stendhal's, dramatizes not only how war results in the loss of the ability to discriminate between secular and spiritual values, but how the downward spiral of petty, apolitical revenge and counter-revenge destroys any sense of patriotic and political ideology.

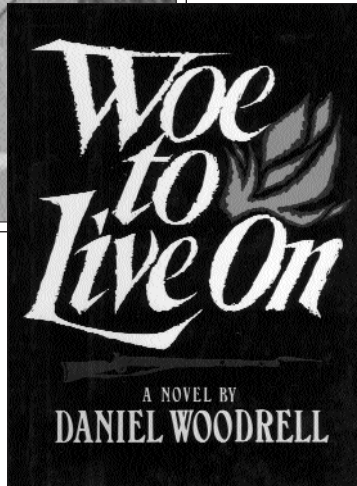
It was while researching the history of the border wars at the Kansas University Spencer Research Library that Woodrell found a story that embodied these issues in the context of recent history. "All along I had been reading about the border wars," he recalled during a 1998 interview, "I realized I had a lot of feelings about it and wanted to express them. In so many ways the border wars relate directly to some of

49. *Ibid.*, 214.

50. Humanities scholar Conrad Donakowski argued, in words recalling Quantrill, that Julien Sorel was "an ambitious peasant who almost learned to be the Talleyrand of the democratic era. Having found that clerical black and civic red both demanded hypocrisy, he used his 'vocation' not for the community but for himself." By no means coincidentally, Sorel, like Quantrill, will die at the hands of the State—he is guillotined. See Conrad L. Donakowski, *A Muse for the Masses: Ritual and Music in an Age of Democratic Revolution, 1770–1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 159.



Daniel Woodrell, author of *Woe to Live On*, the novel from which *Ride With the Devil* was adapted.



the terrible events of recent history, like Vietnam and Bosnia. Atrocities were everywhere. When I was in the Marines, I knew guys who did horrible things and other guys who came down in choppers and tried to stop them. *Woe to Live On* is as much about this as it is about the specific conflicts between the bushwhackers and the Jayhawkers.”<sup>51</sup>

Woodrell admits that the prominent part played in the story by the character Holt, the ex-slave—like-wise a prominent figure in Ang Lee’s forthcoming film—has elicited some protest:

I’ve been taken to task because one of my main characters is a black man who rides with Quantrill. But in the first-person accounts I found at KU, I found a hand-written letter from a black man who had ridden with the bushwhackers against Lawrence.<sup>52</sup> That was odd, I thought at first—a black man riding with pro-slavery guerrillas. But I can understand that. He wasn’t thinking about the big political issues, he was thinking about his friends. That began to help my comprehension about what the Border Wars were really like. It revolved ultimately around issues of family loyalties rather than ideology. Even a famous bushwhacker family, like the Youngers, who had started out pro-Union, turned against the free-staters when they were roughed up by Union militia.

Moreover, contends Woodrell, his story reminds us that Holt and the other guerrillas were not fully grown men, as Hollywood has depicted, but raw teenagers.

They were coming of age at the wrong time. And we forget that German immigrants who came to America at the time were ninety percent pro-

Union; and they were not liked by the Southern side. Therefore, my decision to have Jake ride with the bushwhackers is almost as strange, seemingly, as Holt’s. But again, it’s a question of loyalty, of family. It’s part of the parallel between Jake and Holt—they are both outsiders who find their real “cause” in their attachments to mutual friends.<sup>53</sup>

The Quantrill films remind us that any recounting of history and biography is, as historian George F. Custen wrote, a meditation encoded in a time and place removed from their actual occurrence—and thus subject to a degree of restructuring.<sup>54</sup> To be talked about is to be part of a story, and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers. Moreover, the continued interest in the life and exploits of William Clarke Quantrill is perhaps no different from our fascination with a great work of art or an important historical moment. As cultural historian Leo Braudy has written in *The Frenzy of Renown*, there is the opportunity to reinterpret the subject with constantly renewed meanings, even though those meanings might be very different from what they were generations previously.<sup>55</sup>

*Ride with the Devil* differs from earlier Quantrill films in that it is a revisionist document that consciously breaks down the classical mold of the Hollywood biography. In doing so, it will not only provide a startlingly different portrait of the border wars and the guerrillas who fought them, but it will itself become a piece of history—a “celluloid seen.”

Quantrill’s hard ride has taken him a “far piece,” as they say. And as future filmmakers and films take up the story, you can bet there is still a long way for him to go.

[KH]

51. Daniel Woodrell, interview by author, March 24, 1998.

52. Leslie, *The Devil Knows How to Ride*, 86, wrote that at least three black men rode with Quantrill: John Lobb, Henry Wilson, and John Noland. “Noland was especially well liked by his white fellow veterans and was described by them as a ‘man among men.’” Another black man, Rube, was captured in a guerrilla operation at Baxter Springs. He was a freed black who had once saved the life of bushwhacker chief George Todd. Todd spared his life and sent him to safety in Texas. It is likely that men such as these were the inspiration for the character of Daniel Holt in *Woe to Live On*.

53. Woodrell interview.

54. See Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, 11. Custen continued: “Hollywood film really reduces individuals to part of a set of almost Proppian moves, a mass-tailored contour for fame in which greatness is generic and difference has controllable boundaries.” See *ibid.*, 26.

55. See Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15.