Identification of the Stranger at the Pottawatomie Massacre

JAMES C. MALIN

ON THE night of May 24-25, 1856, John Brown, with four sons, a son-in-law and two other Kansas settlers, made a raid on Proslavery settlers on Mosquito creek and Pottawatomie creek, killing three Doyles, Allen Wilkinson and William Sherman. At the time a special congressional house committee was in Kansas investigating the Kansas troubles. It consisted of John Sherman of Ohio and William A. Howard of Michigan, both Antislavery in sentiment, and Mordecai Oliver of Missouri, a Proslavery Democrat. As the Pottawatomie massacre occurred after the date of the appointment of the special committee the Antislavery majority took the ground that these outrages were outside the scope of their powers. The minority member, Oliver, differed, pointed out that the majority had taken testimony concerning this class of events in Kansas when it supported their partisan purpose, and therefore he insisted that the Pottawatomie massacre be investigated, and on his own responsibility took affidavits of Mrs. Doyle and her surviving minor son, Mrs. Wilkinson and James Harris, who was employed by the Sherman brothers, of whom there were three, Henry, William and Peter, "Dutch Henry," "Dutch Bill" and "Dutch Pete." These papers were printed with Oliver's minority report, and regardless of the merits of the controversy among the members of the committee at the time, the historian owes to Mordecai Oliver a deep debt of gratitude for his stubborn partisan insistence that these be made a matter of permanent record.

In the affidavit of James Harris, whose testimony applied only to the incidents surrounding the murder of "Dutch Bill," he stated that three men were spending the night at his house: William Sherman, John S. Whiteman, and "the other man I did not know. They were stopping with me that night. They had bought a cow from Henry Sherman, and intended to go home the next morning." When John Brown's band entered Harris' house, the men were taken out separately and questioned. Harris omitted comment on Whiteman, but the stranger and Harris himself appear to have given answers satisfactory to John Brown and were returned to the house. Henry Sherman was the man especially desired, but he was absent search-
ing for cattle, and the last man taken out was William Sherman, who did not return. His body was found the next morning on the edge of Pottawatomie creek with the skull split open and part of the brains washed out by the water. As the "John Brown Legend" grew during later years, Free-State men attempted assiduously to discredit Harris' story, saying that undue influence was used in securing his affidavit, and that he told quite a different story privately to Free-State men. The allegations of Free-State men must not be taken too seriously, especially as Harris and others left additional affidavits of the same tenor as his original. In filing claims for losses amounting to $375, suffered during the civil war of 1856, and making proofs by witnesses before the Strickler commission in 1857, Harris made affidavit October 23 charging John Brown with stealing from him a horse, saddle, bridle and gun on the night of the Sherman murder, and, significantly, because of threats against his life, with forcing him to abandon his remaining property and to seek safety elsewhere. A neighbor, Minerva Selby of Anderson county, made affidavit to the losses saying that Harris came the next day and told of the robbery and murder, and Selby confirmed the charge of threats against Harris' life. Martin White made an affidavit also, and one which is most explicit concerning the problem of Harris' testimony:

Know that the petitioner was greatly alarmed; seemed to apprehend danger from the murderers of Sherman, as the petitioner was at the premises of Sherman when the act [murder] was committed. The petitioner expressed his fears of being killed to prevent his divulging the murder. Believe he was in danger of being murdered. The safety of himself and family required him to leave his home. 1

Peculiarly, there has been little interest shown in the identity of the stranger, or whether he existed except in Harris' affidavit, and if he was a real person whether he became known and gave evidence against the murderers of the Pottawatomie which would corroborate that of Harris, or whether his testimony would discredit Harris. The little that has been said about him is associated primarily with the historical reminiscences of James Christian. In May, 1858, Christian and James H. Lane announced the formation of a law partnership, with offices at Lawrence. The political set-up is familiar to all who understand practical workings of law firms that specialize in political law business. Lane was the outstanding Free-State lawyer-politician in Kansas, and James Christian was a prominent

Democrat, or so-called Proslavery lawyer of the territory. The firm was ambidextrous, therefore, and could meet any legal emergency where a judicious use of political influence might be of advantage to the success of clients. Such a background in any case, and especially in connection with the notorious Jim Lane, is not at all prepossessing as qualifying Christian to speak on so controversial a matter as John Brown and the Pottawatomie massacre. After the days of Kansas troubles, however, Christian served in the union army during the civil war and continued in the state as lawyer and newspaper man, and in spite of the fact that he was a Democrat in Republican Kansas, he was held in high regard. This later reputation offsets somewhat the earlier stigma. Christian’s story was that—

Jerome Glanville was the man who was stopping at Dutch Henry’s on the night of the massacre, and was taken out to be killed, as the others were. On examination he was found to be only a traveler, but was kept a prisoner until morning and then discharged. He informed me personally who were the principal actors in that damming midnight tragedy, and said that the next morning, while the old man raised his hands to Heaven to ask a blessing, they were stained with the dried blood of his victims. For being too free in his expressions about the matter he [Glanville] was soon after shot in his wagon, between Black Jack and the head of Bull creek, while on his way to Kansas City.

There are some differences between this version and that of Harris. The latter said the stranger had bought a cow, and the former said that he was “only a traveler.” Harris did not record that the stranger was taken away when Brown’s party left, and implies quite definitely that all who were in the house remained. He said that two men had been left in the house to guard Mrs. Harris, Whiteman and the stranger, when Sherman was taken out, and at a signal, this guard departed. Christian’s story of the bloodstained hands adds dramatic quality to his story, but is not essential to the main issue, and scarcely rings true.

The only one of the major biographers of John Brown to recognize the existence of Christian’s story is Sanborn, who made a footnote of it, with the sneering introduction that it rested solely on the authority of a Kansas Democrat. Villard ignored the whole issue. Among the lesser and distinctly controversial biographies, Connelley dismissed the whole story with bitter invective, and to give plausi-

2. As James Harris was employed by Sherman and lived in Sherman’s house or at least in a house at Sherman’s place, Harris had referred to the house as his in the sense that he lived there, but Christian referred to it by Sherman’s name as owner. The Sherman boys were bachelors.
bility to this view, seized only upon that doubtful part of the
Christian story which deals with the bloody hands. Mrs. Charles
Robinson gave Christian's story its widest publicity in the appendix
to the tenth edition of her Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life
(1899).

Historiography is occasionally enlivened by accidental discoveries
of laymen, and on the afternoon of July 27, 1904, while walking
across a vacant lot at Penn street between Forty-first and Forty-
second streets in Kansas City, Mo. (south of old Westport), one
W. H. Gibbens noticed a fragment of stone. It was inscribed: "To
the memory of Jerome H. Glanville; born 1825, murdered by four
Yankee Abolitionists on Bull creek, in . . . [?]" The final
part of the inscription was broken off. The stone was a mystery and
the news item came to the attention of G. W. Brown of Rockford,
III., where it was printed in the Morning Star of that place, July 31.
G. W. Brown had been editor of the Kansas Herald of Freedom,
Lawrence, during the Kansas troubles, was a notorious character
whose reputation for truth was somewhat tarnished, had been deeply
involved in the bitter and degrading controversies of the early 1880's
over John Brown and was again involved in unseemly controversy,
principally with W. E. Connelley, over the same subject, and was
being financed and encouraged by Mrs. Charles Robinson of Law-
rence. He jumped at the opportunity offered by this discovery and
wrote a letter published in the Kansas City (Mo.) Times, August 4,
1904, identifying the stone with the Glanville of the James Christian
story, but added no new information, beyond the fact that the
identification gave the fragment of tombstone a definite significance,
and was interpreted as giving support to the verity of Christian's
story.

In another letter, one printed in the Rockford (Ill.) Morning Star,
December 11, 1904, G. W. Brown declared that the murder occurred
in June, 1856. At this time he made the additional error of saying
the four were John Brown and his three sons. The Christian letter
had been written originally to G. W. Brown in January, 1880, in
response to Brown's "Reminiscences of Old John Brown," these being
published serially in the Kansas press. It seems peculiar that Brown
in both of these newspaper letters of 1904, should have quoted the
Christian letter from Sanborn's extract instead of the whole from
his own original. Possibly the original had been lost.

G. W. Brown's intervention in the matter was the opening signal

5. W. E. Connelley, John Brown (1900), pp. 203, 204.
6. Kansas City (Mo.) Star, July 26, 1904.
for controversialists to enter the lists against him. August Bondi, a
Jewish speculator and friend of John Brown in 1856, had made the
mistake several times of recording his supposed reminiscences of
the "Old Hero," and now branded G. W. Brown's first letter as pure
fiction and related two stories of his own. One that the Browns
intercepted George Wilson [probate judge of Anderson county]
and another man, took them to camp, but on the intercession of
Theodore Weiner, one of the John Brown massacre party, let them
go free on the promise of Wilson to leave the country. Bondi
claimed to have had this story from George Wilson himself in 1857,
and from Weiner himself at Orson Day's cabin May 24 [?], im-
mediately after the massacre. Secondly, Bondi insisted that the
Browns could not have followed Glanville, that they were not out
of Douglas and Franklin counties between May 24 and June 15,
that he and Weiner left for Leavenworth June 15, that Weiner left
the territory for St. Louis, and that he himself returned to the Brown
community July 2 and had dinner with Brown at Orson Day's
cabin.7

There is one quite simple answer to Bondi, besides the fact that
there is little if anything in his story that is true, and that is, that
the whole of his letter was quite beside the point. Christian's story
implied that the murder of Glanville occurred very soon after the
Pottawatomie massacre, and Bondi based his whole refutation on
that assumption, and went further, insisting that to be true it must
have occurred prior to June 15. In this limitation of the time ele-
ment Bondi was controlled by his claim that he had received an
account of the Glanville episode directly from Weiner, and Weiner
left the territory June 15. The net result of the encounter between
G. W. Brown and August Bondi was that the substance of G. W.
Brown's identification of the Glanville tombstone with the Glanville
of the Christian story stood as completely unchallenged as before
Bondi intervened.

The most interesting aspect of the Glanville death problem was
that there was no need to make such a mystery of it. It was all a
matter of contemporary record, except the actual date of his death.
G. W. Brown's Herald of Freedom, November 8, 1856, carried the
story of "Another Base Murder."

A Free State settler residing on the Ottawa Creek, on Saturday last [No-


7. August Bondi to G. W. Martin, secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, August
9, 1964.
then shot and left for dead. The ball entered the back, at the side of the spinal column, and passed through the body a little below the heart. He was found a few hours after by a party of teamsters, and was taken to Westport. There is no probability that he is now living. The assassins are said to be a party of Georgians who are encamped in the vicinity, and who are attempting to carry out their threats of extermination against the Free State settlers. We call upon Gov. Geary to inquire into these facts, and take immediate measures to disperse and bring to justice the gang of outlaws who are again laboring to set the country in an uproar.

On the same day that this was being published in Lawrence, the Star of Empire, a Border Ruffian paper in Westport, Mo., printed a story of the same incident, but with a different coloring. Glanville was identified by name and it was stated that he was shot at Bull creek by Abolitionists and had been brought into Westport November 1, and was recovering from his wounds. This Border Ruffian sheet, usually discredited by historians, fortified its story by publishing the affidavit of Jerome H. Glanville, sworn November 6 before Justice of the Peace A. Street, Kaw township, Jackson county, Missouri. The affidavit stated that he was from Preston county, Virginia, and lived on Ottawa creek (northern Franklin county or southern Douglas county, Kansas) and on Thursday, October 30, was on his way to Missouri on the Santa Fé road, when four men overtook and passed him east of Prairie City (near present Baldwin, Douglas county). At the time they passed him he was talking to a party of surveyors. He heard that the four had robbed McCamish farther east on the road and they returned and waited for him at a point about one hundred yards west of Bull creek. Two rode up on each side demanding that he stop and deliver his money. His oxen did not stop quickly enough, but he made an attempt to reach his rifle and fire, but was shot from behind and the four fled. He declared that “I think these four men who attacked me belonged to Captain Brown’s company, the notorious Abolitionist of Osawatomie.” Glanville thought that he had been betrayed by a neighbor, who just before he started asked him where he was going, and on being told that he was going to Westport for flour, galloped off.8

By the time the Leavenworth Herald had received both the Herald of Freedom and the Star of Empire with the conflicting versions of the same story Editor Eastin was in a mood to write a scorching editorial on Free-State journalism, pointing out that Glanville was a Proslavery man and had been “attacked by a party of [John] Brown’s thieves, who call themselves Free-State men,” and then

8. This is taken from The Kansas Weekly Herald, Leavenworth, November 16, 1856, which copied it from the Star of Empire of November 8. A file of the Leavenworth paper is available for this period, but none of the Star of Empire seems to have been preserved.
"this is the way that the outrages of that party are covered up. [G. W.] Brown manufactured the lie, to do away with the effect of Glanville's affidavit." 9

It should be born in mind that, according to the accounts referred to, Glanville was still living. No account of his death has been found in the available newspaper files, although the local Westport paper may have recorded it. The fragment of tombstone picked up in Kansas City in 1904, assuming that it is genuine, and there seems to be no reason for a contrary view, did not have the date of his death. Summing up the evidence to this point it is obvious that the Bondi story is eliminated completely. If Christian's story were true, then the time which elapsed between the Pottawatomie massacre and the attack on Glanville was longer than he implied, although careful reading of his statement demonstrates that he set no time limit. Glanville's affidavit did not identify positively the attackers as Captain Brown's men, but he stated explicitly that he thought they were. This was November, 1856, and John Brown had left the territory the first week in October and was at Tabor, Iowa, October 10, was in Chicago October 25-26, started back toward Tabor to overtake two sons October 27, and was in Chicago December 1, and did not operate in Kansas again until the summer of 1858.

It would seem that the trail had been lost and that any attempt to connect the attack on Glanville with John Brown had failed in all aspects of the case. The appearances are deceptive, however, and the principle recognized in criminology and popular detective yarns holds good in history, that there is no perfect crime. Immediately after the Pottawatomie massacre in May the settlers on Pottawatomie creek, irrespective of views on the slavery controversy, assembled, denounced the crime, and pledged themselves to bring the criminals to justice. Those were not idle resolutions adopted at that meeting as some historians have alleged. Free-State men who had been associated closely with John Brown's movements on the expedition which started to the assistance of Lawrence on May 21 under John Brown, Jr., and from which the elder John Brown's massacre expedition had branched off, appeared before "bogus" Proslavery territorial law officers and swore out affidavits, and warrants were issued on these affidavits for the eight men guilty of the murders. 10 One only of the eight was arrested, was promptly

10. Some aspects of these events and further data on the affidavits are discussed by the present author in "The Hoopland Examination," in The Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. VII (May, 1925), pp. 133-133. The full discussion of the John Brown massacre cases in the United States courts is reserved for another time and place.
indicted by the grand jury for murder, and subpoenas were issued for the necessary witnesses for both the prosecution and the defense. All was done in proper legal form. The chronology of these events is as follows: James Townsley was arrested November 22, 1856, the indictment was filed November 29, and the subpoenas for witnesses issued December 3 and later. One subpoena called for two men, John Wightman and "—— Glenville" as witnesses for the prosecution. It was endorsed by Deputy Marshal Fain on December 10, that Wightman could not be found and that "Glenville" was dead. One interesting error was made by the territorial prosecutor's office in drafting the papers. Glenville's name was on the list of witnesses for the James P. Doyle murder, rather than for the William Sherman murder, for which he would have been a material witness. As the indictments for each of three murders were drawn separately and the accused seems to have been brought to bar to answer to all indictments at one time, the error may not have been important. Two events preclude an answer to the difficulty, the death of Glenville and the fact that for unknown reasons the cases never came to trial.

Some points still need to be explained. Glenville was attacked October 30, and Townsley was not arrested until November 22, but this does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of the attack on Glenville being for the purpose of preventing him from testifying as a witness to the Pottawatomie affair. Governor Geary had been greatly aggravated by the persistence of disorder in southeastern Kansas after he had pacified northern Kansas, and decided to make a personal tour of that region, starting from Lecompton October 17. He spent considerable time in the war-torn region of Dutch Henry's crossing, Osawatomie and Paola. On October 21 he was at the crossing hearing all versions of the Pottawatomie creek murders, but his minutes preserved a discreet silence concerning what he learned that day. Proceeding on his way toward Fort Scott he was overtaken on the morning of October 24 by the news that a band of Free-State men had followed in his rear and attacked the house of Judge Briscoe Davis, whom he had visited the day before. Such an "impudent outrage" could not be overlooked and he canceled his Fort Scott visit, turned back, sending troops in all directions on the trail of the outlaws with instructions that all meet that night at Dutch Henry's crossing. No prisoners were taken on this day's search, but the

12. All the documents mentioned are in the possession of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, in the collection of papers of the U. S. district court for Kansas territory.
governor claimed he knew the guilty parties and issued an offer of $200 reward for their capture. No names were mentioned, how-
never, but in subsequent identification, the leader of the party was Capt. James H. Holmes and others of the party were men whose names are recorded also on John Brown's own roll of enlistments in his Kansas military band. During the early part of the governor's tour he had made some arrests, but his chief interest had been pacification and reconciliation. The Davis episode changed all that and he sent Commissioner Hoogland and U. S. troops into southern Kansas to clean up. Hoogland had made his start November 15 and his concluding report of November 29 has been mentioned above. The governor's investigation of affairs at the crossing October 21 followed by the man-hunt resulting from Holmes' raid on Davis' house on October 23 provides sufficient motive for members of the Brown gang to wish all witnesses of their crimes removed, even though John Brown himself had left the territory. According to Harris and his friends, he had escaped a similar fate only by abandoning his home.

Incidentally the examination of this episode reflects several elements of significance. Free-State attempts to discredit Harris' affidavit receive no support from the subsequent developments, and on the contrary, the implications are in his favor. Christian's reminiscences of 1880 made the explicit identification of the stranger and of the motive for his murder, and affords a rare instance where the principal facts of a reminiscence about John Brown seem to be supported by contemporary recorded facts, except for the dubious bloody-hands story. Christian emerges as a more reliable writer of old settler's reminiscences of the Kansas troubles than most of his Free-State contemporaries. A third point is that in this instance the Border-Ruffian press, even the sensational Star of Empire, proved more reliable than the Free-State press,—a conclusion most unorthodox among American historians.

In the strictest sense, it may be argued that the identification of Glanville as the stranger at Harris' house on the night of the Pottawatomi massacre is based upon circumstantial evidence. Harris' affidavit mentioned Wightman and a stranger as present, the subpoena in question linked the two names Wightman and Glanville, in the same document as witnesses for the prosecution and separate from the other witnesses, most of whose names were endorsed on one of the several indictments of James Townsley. If this was

coincidence, it was a most remarkable one, and especially in view of
the findings of the present author that the territorial officers had
made a most thorough investigation of the Pottawatomie massacre,
and within a few days of the event knew definitely the name and
identity of every one of the eight participants in the crimes. Free-
State men coöperated and supplied the necessary affidavits on which
the warrants were issued. Any mystery that surrounds the matter
turns not on the question of identity, but on the reasons why
they were not brought to justice. In view of all of the circum-
stances, the investigators should have had no difficulty, and ap-
parently had none, in identifying the stranger of Harris’ affidavit
and calling as a witness the man who had bought the cow of Henry
Sherman May 24, and presumably took her away on Sunday, May
25, after the discovery of Dutch Bill’s body in the creek, and the
bodies of the other four murdered men and boys in the immediate
neighborhood. All the evidence taken together, even if it does not
constitute absolute identification of the man and the motive for his
murder, certainly approaches the border-line where circumstantial
evidence becomes direct proof.