

Letters on the War in Kansas in 1856

Edited by V. E. GIBBENS

I. INTRODUCTION

THREE letters of John Lawrie, who fought with the Free-State men in the troubles in Kansas in 1856, were carefully copied by his brother Arthur in the latter's diary, and have just come to light. The letters, as will be observed, were written after John Lawrie had returned to Indiana in 1857.

Only a few facts are known of John's life. He was born in New York City on August 8, 1824, being one of a family of four boys and two girls born to Alexander Lawrie, Scottish immigrant, and Sarah Coombe Lawrie. Of the children the most noted was Alexander, Jr., a popular portrait and landscape painter in Philadelphia and New York during the 1860's and 1870's.¹ The father was a merchant, but perhaps a none too successful one, for in 1852 he and his wife, accompanied by their son Arthur and daughter Mary, settled on a farm near Chalmers in White county, Indiana.

By February, 1854, John had joined his parents, and probably remained with them until he left in 1856 for a ten months' sojourn in Kansas. Whether he made a return trip to Kansas is merely conjectural.²

He served throughout the Civil War with the troops from Indiana—from April 23 to August 6, 1861, with the Tenth infantry regiment, Indiana volunteers, Company E, on a three-months' enlistment; and with Companies B and G, from September 19, 1861, to September 19, 1864, on a three-year enlistment.³ According to his application for admission to the Indiana State Soldiers' Home, he reenlisted in December, 1864, and served until May 15, 1865, company and regiment not being given.⁴ He held variously, as stated in the application, the ranks of private, corporal, and second lieutenant.

A nephew's diary, which on May 19 referred to his having returned from the army on the day before, establishes his presence on

1. *Dictionary of American Biography* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1933), v. XI, p. 54.

2. See the last sentence in the first letter.

3. *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1866), v. IV, pp. 55, 158, and 166.

4. The adjutant general's *Report*, so far as I have been able to discover, does not mention this period of service. If not, it would appear that the report was at fault.

the White county farm until 1867. The diary closes then, however, and two diaries of a niece and his brother Arthur, kept respectively in 1876-1877 and 1897-1899, do not mention him. He must have remained in Indiana, however, as when he applied in November, 1899, for admission to the soldiers' home he wrote that he had resided in the state for nearly fifty years.

He was admitted to the home on June 16, 1900, and except for an interval of slightly more than eight months, spent the rest of his life there. He died on January 14, 1905, at the age of 80 years.

Since the main events related in the letters are already familiar (such as the dispersal of the legislature at Topeka on July 4, 1856, and the various battles mentioned) and books on this phase of Kansas history are numerous,⁵ it has not been deemed necessary to explain them in footnotes.

II. THE LETTERS⁶

Wolf Mound Farm, White Co., Indiana
Apl. 16th, 1857

Dear Art,

After an absence of ten months I now find myself again at home, and surrounded by old associations, among which prominently stands my long-neglected correspondence with you. It was my hope on my way home that when I reached it I would find you with Bob and Lizzy⁷ and the little ones all living under the Lawrie roof-tree. But as I cannot talk to you face to face, I must talk to you through the mail, and tell you where I have been so long and what I have been about.

When I left home on the fifteenth of last June I had no intention of making a home in Kansas. I intended in case I could find any organization ready to take the field against the Missourians, to use my utmost endeavors to change the attitude of the Free-State settlers from a defensive to an offensive warfare. When I reached Leavenworth, I was unable to find any organization of Free-State men, and could only tell one when I met him by his hanging head and subdued tone of voice. While remaining in this place, the *Star*

5. J. N. Holloway, *History of Kansas* (Lafayette, Ind., 1868); Leverett W. Spring, *Kansas: The Prelude to the War for the Union* (Boston, 1885); and Sara T. L. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston, 1856), to name only a few that have come to the attention of the writer of this introduction in his curiosity to check the account of the events related in the diary with historical accounts of the same happenings. [EDITOR'S NOTE: Lawrie was positive in statements concerning some things about which there is a great deal of controversy. His version, therefore, should not be fully evaluated until other contemporaneous accounts are read.]

6. A few corrections have been made in spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing, but, in general, the attempt has been made to leave the text as it stood in the diary.

7. Brother-in-law and sister, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Telfer.

of the West landed at the levee having on board the Chicago boys as prisoners, and fifty men could have released them and put them in possession of their arms, but there were a certain "five-thousand Missourians" who lived somewhere not far off that would be most grievously provoked should a rescue be attempted, and consequently none was attempted.

Hearing that people held up their heads and spoke what they thought in Lawrence, I started for that point and soon found myself at home as far as a hatred of tyranny and a thirst for vengeance for the insult of the 21st of May was concerned. The people had concluded to try whether there was truth in the Border Ruffian assertion *The Damned Yankees won't fight!* There was quite a stir among the young men in the way of target-firing and drilling in order to prepare themselves for any emergency that might arise requiring them to contend with superior numbers, the only thing that thus far had held them back. I found that arms were really scarce. I expected to find plenty of improved fire-arms, and it was with the greatest difficulty I succeeded in getting an old condemned musket. I was looked upon with distrust by a great many persons in Lawrence, having the appearance of a spy in their eyes. It was complimentary, for my appearance seemed above my position to them; but it was very disagreeable. The only military company in town (*the Stubbs*) expected to attend the convention at Topeka on the second and third of July and the opening of the legislature on the Fourth, when it was expected they would be needed to defend the legislature against the Ruffians and troops of the U. S. I applied for admission into the company and was put off with rather evasive answers. I went up to Topeka, however, resolved to prove myself a true man when the trying time came. I found the people discussing the propriety of defending the legislature against all who might attempt to disperse it. A few goddamned white-livered lawyers succeeded in getting through a resolution that it was the determination of the Free-State men *not to molest or hinder the U. S. troops*. On the fourth of July at an hour before noon the troops charged into town and dispersed the legislature and retired again unmolested.

I went back to the place where I worked near Lawrence, and did nothing but damn and curse lawyers and professional politicians until the sixth of August, when it was decided by some of the boys in town to go down to a block house erected by a company of Georgian robbers in the lower part of the territory and whip the robbers and burn the block house. I succeeded in obtaining permission to ac-

company the Stubbs on this expedition. We all slept in one place that night so that we might be awakened at an early hour and depart unobserved. We marched from one o'clock in the morning until breakfast time when we camped on Coal creek, where we remained two hours awaiting the arrival of two wagons and our captain. We were here joined by the Waukarusa company and the Coal creek company, making our force some seventy strong. From this camp on we had a chance to ride over smooth going, and we only stopped long enough to bait the horses until we reached Bull creek right in the heart of the enemy's country, where we camped for the night some three hours after dark, having lost our guide about the middle of the afternoon. When the guard was appointed for the night, I had the honor of being selected for the post on extreme left of the camp for the first mounting. I was tired, sleepy and hungry, but I felt the importance of the trust placed in me and managed to keep awake without making much noise by biting my lips and tongue. Our camp had a deep ravine in the rear and a small ravine on each flank, and was kept perfectly dark and quiet. At about one in the morning of the eighth of August (my birthday) I heard the tramp of horses' feet in the direction we came from, apparently right in our trail. I knew that our guide was out and perhaps it might be him, but then again it might not. I began to get very wide awake indeed. Presently I caught a glimpse of *two* horsemen, which satisfied me it was not the guide returning. I cocked my old musket and when they came within about a rod of me ordered them to halt, but instead of halting they clapped in their spurs and wheeled off to the right as fast as their horses would carry them. As quick as they wheeled I drew a bead on them and pulled, but the old musket didn't go, and before I could get ready again they had made some fifty yards when I let them have the buckshot and of course woke up the camp. Our captain inquired who had fired when I told him what had occurred, which I thought was discredited. In the morning I went out to see if I could find some proof in the shape of some of their arms which in their hurry they might have dropped, but only found a blood trail. When I was returning, I met four of our men who were putting out in the direction the two horsemen had taken in the night, and presently they returned with a saddled horse which had a couple of buckshot in him—one on the right side of his rump and the other on the inside of his off hind leg. My credit raised wonderfully when it was seen I really shot at something, and it rose still more when it was afterward discovered that the two men I had

shot at were Capt. Cook of the Bull creek Ruffians and one of his scouts.

After the return of our guide we resumed our march in the direction of the Georgian block house, yet some twenty-five miles distant, and met with no incidents worthy of note until we reached the vicinity of the block house, where we were all rather anxious to see how the boys would behave under fire, many of them never having as yet heard singing lead. The night was rather dark, and the enemy showed no light and made no noise. Our captain (who by the way was an old man of wars man) reconnoitered the ground and concluded to lead us right on to the place and take it by assault as we had no artillery to storm the place with. The battalion was divided into two platoons, and the block house approached from toward its front and left so that in case we found it necessary to fire we could give them a destructive cross-fire. We went up as well as old veterans ever dared to go; and if there was any disorder at all whatever, it was occasioned by some of the boys rushing ahead too fast. The sound of our steady *tramp! tramp!* was too much for the garrison and they incontinently fled. We found about ten hundred pounds of bacon, some meal, several sacks of flour, a barrel of sugar, [and?] various articles recognized by many of our men as having been taken from Lawrence on the 21st of May, besides a number of letters written by Free-State men to their friends in the states which had been mailed in U. S. post offices, and probably had been abstracted in Missouri and forwarded to the Robbers of the Blue Lodge in order to give them whatever information they might possess of the prospects and conditions of their writers. After taking out all the provisions and military stores, we fired the block house and started home again by the light of it. On our return we had a most fatiguing time, but reached Lawrence without any incident occurring worthy of note. . . .

I found all our people well. I shall remain here until the middle of June when I intend returning to Kansas.

Your affectionate brother
John Lawrie

Wolf Mound Farm, White Co., Indiana

April 19th, 1857

Dear Art,

According to promise I now resume my history of my adventures in Kansas.

On our return to Lawrence there was some degree of hesitation manifested in regard to making an attack upon another fortified band of robbers who were occupying a stronghold near Washington creek, called Fort Sanders [Saunders—named for J. P. Saunders]. The *wisecheads* succeeded in having a committee appointed and sent to wait on Major [John] Sedgwick of the U. S. army and represent to him the character and conduct of the Washington creek robbers and assassins. He told the committee they were mistaken in supposing the colony at that place robbers and assassins, and advised them to make further inquiries into their real character, and if they did not prove to be well-meaning citizens, he would permit the Free-State men to drive them out.

As if we were not already satisfied as to their character, the noble and heroic Major [D. S.] Hoyt was sent out to learn more of them, and they most basely murdered him and disfigured him by pounding the fleshy parts off his face and then putting some chemical substance upon [it] to remove whatever might still be left by which he might be recognized. (This was the last of the influence of the god-damned lawyers and professional politicians in Lawrence.) In order to carry the stronghold of these Ruffians artillery was necessary. We had none, but the enemy had one at Franklin, about four miles from Lawrence. It was taken at Sacramento by Col. [A. W.] Doniphan and is still known as *Old Sacramento*. One night about seventy-five of us took the road to Franklin and while on the road learned that Jim Lane was along and would plan the attack. Just before entering the town ten of our men were detailed under Lieut. Earle to make a demonstration in front of the buildings occupied by the garrison in which they had the cannon, while the main body of our men advanced upon their rear. The ruffians were summoned to surrender, but they wouldn't do it, so we replied to their fire in such an effective way that we drove them all into the center building, which was impervious to bullets, being constructed of logs. From this position they gave us a pretty hot fire, killing one man named Sackett and wounding two others, Gunther and Brooks. I had a position with my old musket close to a porthole in the rear of the log house, and by aiming at one flash and firing immediately at the next so dis-

concerted their aim that no more of our men were struck after my first charge of buckshot reached them. (While I was getting my aim, I got a tap on the side of my hat and made the discovery that a man cannot hear the lead sing that strikes him.) As our fire didn't seem to make much impression on them, a wagon was loaded with hay and run up to the building which was furthest to windward (which happened to be the post office) and set fire to; when our boys commenced singing out "*There she goes!*" "*There goes the roof!*" "*Stand off, boys, maybe there's powder in it!*" By and by it began to work on the garrison, and they screamed out "*Quarter! Quarter! Quarter!*" I spoke out pretty loud, "*They are calling for water.*" "No," said they, "*Quarters! Quarters! for God's sake, give us Quarters!*" We told them to march out and stack their arms and we would do so, which they did in double quick time, and then we upset the load of burning hay, and not even the wagon was burned, saying nothing of the buildings! After gathering up their arms and getting *Old Sacramento* mounted, we started back to Lawrence and arrived there safely, but sorrowing for the loss of a brave Michigan boy named Sackett.

After taking this gun and before marching against Fort Sanders, it was necessary to run a lot of cannon balls for Sacramento. How do you suppose it was done where there was no means of melting cast-iron? I will tell you. A large chunk of wrought iron was suspended by a wire inside of the mould, and then the mould was filled up with type metal, *made from type which had been thrown into the Kaw river by the Ruffians on the 21st of May!*

When everything was ready, we started for the Free-State camp on Rock creek, where we found a large body of our men waiting for us under the command of Capt. [Samuel] Walker. Here we camped for the night, and the next day started for Washington creek to try our hands upon a famous stronghold defended by four hundred of the enemy. Jim Lane commanded in person. Capt. Walker had charge of our cavalry. Capt. Beckerton [Bickerton] had charge of the artillery, and Capt. Cutter commanded our company, which acted as light infantry. *Old Sacramento* was stationed about forty rods directly in front of the fort, and Capt. Walker's command was divided on the right and left of it, while we advanced directly upon it until we came within about one-hundred yards, when we halted and were ordered to lie down. Before a shot was fired, we received the order "Up, Stubbs! Double quick, forward march!" and the way we put in to it was a caution. We scaled their stockade, rushed

across their embanked breastwork and entered the fort in less time than I have been writing the account of the charge, and found that the enemy had acted on the old adage:—

Whosoever runs away
Will live to fight another day.

We followed on in the wake of the retreating Ruffians, charged through two deep ravines, and made the discovery that the enemy knew the country better than we did, at least that they knew more of their own whereabouts. We took a large quantity of arms at the fort besides considerable other plunder besides military stores, etc. Who should I see here but Bill Porter, busy loading a four-mule wagon with bacon, muskets, flour, powder, tents, etc., who exclaimed when he saw me: "Why, John Larry! who the hell would have tho't of seeing you here?"

After taking out all we wanted, we set fire to the fort and fell back upon our camp of the previous night on Rock creek, where, as soon as we had supper, we received intelligence that [H. T.] Titus' gang had threatened to burn Judge Wakefield's house, and off we started across the country to pay our respects to the famous Col. Titus, who lived within one mile and a quarter of Lecompton. After a long and fatiguing march we encamped not far from Capt. Walker's place, but not until we had the pleasure of an accidental meeting with Col. Titus' gang of mounted robbers, who left us in a hurry minus two of their horses, we having killed the rider of one and taken the rider of the other prisoner. We were joined about daybreak by a reinforcement from Lawrence and started immediately for Titus' place, but the Chicago boys got the start of the Stubbs and had the fun all over before we came up. Titus had one man killed and one besides himself wounded. We took nineteen prisoners, Titus among the number, contrary to the wishes of a great many of the boys, but he begged so like a whipped puppy—so cringingly—that he was thought too goddamned mean, too despicable to notice sufficiently to kill him. One of his negroes, who was out at the stable during the fight, said, "Massa Titus wanted six abolitionists for breakfast! Yah! Yah! Gorra Massy! guess he get his belly full dis monin'!" With the exception of military stores Capt. Walker allowed nothing to be taken, but consigned the stronghold and its contents to the flames.

I forgot to state that the old gun *Sacramento* first spoke at this place in favor of the Free-State cause, and also circulated several copies of the *Herald of Freedom* amongst Titus' crowd. Titus said

he had no idea we could hit the house at all at the distance the gun was placed, to say nothing of knocking the door and windows in with round shot and then filling the house with cannister. Capt. [Henry J.] Shombre of the Indiana company received a mortal wound in a charge he made upon the Ruffians' camp, which was about two-hundred yards north of the house. One or two others of our men received slight wounds; Capt. Walker got a charge of buck-shot in his breast, but having on two or three woollen shirts they didn't penetrate the skin. During the fight it commenced raining, and fearing that our Sharps rifles would not be in fit trim for another fight until they were dried, Capt. Walker wouldn't allow us to march against Lecompton, as we desired him to do, and so we started back to Lawrence and arrived there safely without meeting with any adventure worthy of notice. . . .

Your affectionate brother
John Lawrie

Wolf Mound Farm, May 11th, 1857

Dear Art & Bob:—

After an unaccountable delay I again resume my narrative. In my second letter I left off in recounting the affair at Titus' fort and the capture of that gentleman and eighteen of his associates. Nothing very remarkable came under my observation after this affair until Governor [Wilson] Shannon came to Lawrence accompanied by Major Sedgwick of the U. S. cavalry *to make a treaty with the rebels in our camp*. He agreed to deliver up to us what prisoners his party had and the twelve-pound howitzer which [Samuel] Pomeroy so cowardly delivered over to the Ruffians on the 21st of May, in exchange for the prisoners we held, and agreed to make no more war upon us. Major Sedgwick agreed to see the treaty carried out, and accordingly we escorted the prisoners back to Lecompton and made the exchange. The boys were delighted to see Betsy again, *i. e.*, the howitzer.

Soon after this Shannon resigned, and [Daniel] Woodson by virtue of his office became governor. He called out the Missourians, who came in great force. We were poorly off for powder, and our regiment was sent up to Topeka to escort the Plymouth company into Lawrence as they had a large supply and were not strong enough to force their way through. While we were on this duty, Ruffian [John W.] Reid with twelve-hundred men was playing such deviltry in the southern part of the territory that Jim Lane left

Lawrence with two hundred and fifty men in order to find Reid and give him battle. He came up to him at Bull creek and drove in his outpost before dark. The next day after a little skirmishing between the scouts Jim formed his line of battle and advanced upon the Ruffians, but they got so homesick they started off immediately for Missouri and never stopped until they reached home. When we returned from our duty, we found an order awaiting us to join Jim Lane immediately and bring along extra rations and ammunition, which we obeyed. We had not proceeded over five miles before we met a dispatch from Jim Lane stating that we should return as the enemy had fled at his approach, and as he was not prepared to pursue them he was on his return to Lawrence himself. After this we treed a party in Lecompton, but as they complied with our demand of an unconditional release of all the Free-State men held by them in Lecompton, we withdrew.

We had a great deal racing around the territory after the Ruffians, but somehow they were not to be caught, until on the 13th of September Jim Lane treed two companies, Capt. Robinson's and Capt. [H. A.] Lowe's, at Hickory Point. They took refuge in the log buildings, and Jim sent us word to bring him *Sacramento* by the way of Topeka, which was the route he had taken in finding the Ruffians. In order that you may have an idea of the blunder Col. [J. A.] Harvey made as a military man, I will make a diagram of the different localities.⁸

He had explicit orders to march by the way of Topeka, but instead of doing so he took us straight across the Delaware country to Hickory Point. When we got there, we were surprised in not finding Lane, but as we found the enemy we pitched in and made them surrender. The reason we missed Lane was that he had received [Gov. J. W.] Geary's proclamation and immediately withdrew his force and sent Harvey a countermand to his previous order by the route he had been ordered to come. After the battle we withdrew from Hickory Point about five miles and encamped at a place called Newell's Mills.⁹

This was the night of the 14th of September. On the night of the 12th we were up all night at Franklin on the lookout for the advance guard of Reid's new army; on the night of the 13th we were marching all night against Hickory Point, so that on the night of the 14th we were pretty well worn out.

8. A tracing of the map is also available. It is not reproduced here since the several places shown in the sketch were not all in their true positions in relation to each other.

9. Now Oskaloosa.—Andreas, A. T., *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, 1883), p. 502.

About midnight we supposed the Kickapoo rangers were about to attack us, and just as old Tom Bickerton was about letting them have the contents of *Old Sacramento* we made the discovery that we were nearly surrounded by U. S. troops. Harvey made himself scarce, and we did the only thing we could under the circumstances—*surrendered*—because *Fremont was to be elected then*, and we were willing to go to hell with our boxes full of cartridges rather than do anything that would have a tendency to defeat his election. I laid down at Capt. Cutter's order my rifle, knife, and revolver, and never have seen them since. Capt. [T. J.] Wood of the U. S. cavalry said he would be personally responsible for the arms. We were taken to the U. S. camp near Lecompton and then had a realizing sense of the importance of the U. S. army.

Boys, I will defer for the present an account of our prison life. I do not feel in the humor to write when I think of it. I can tell it by little snatches, but I am afraid I cannot do it justice with the pen. . . .

Your affectionate brother
John Lawrie