

Originally published in:
Muzzle Blasts, February, 2008

On the Home Front

By Mary-Lane Kamberg

Olathe Kansas, September 6, 1862

Samuel walked his horse through the woods along Mill Creek, his friend Auggie close behind. A low rumble of hooves broke the silence. Samuel looked back up the road. In the light of a full moon, more than a hundred horsemen trotted toward town.

"That's Captain Harvey's company!" Auggie said. "Let's go back and meet them."

Samuel shook his head. "Can't. Told Ma I'd be home by midnight. Pa's in Kansas City."

Auggie shook his finger at Samuel and imitated Samuel's mother's voice. "No need hanging around soldiers. You can serve God and country right here at home."

Samuel laughed. "But, Ma. I don't see how!"

Auggie's voice changed back to normal. "C'mon. We can see them from here."

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to watch 'em ride in." Samuel turned his horse around in the shadows of elms and hickories. The horsemen rode without the precision of other Union cavalry he'd seen.

"Them ain't Federals," Samuel whispered.

"What?"

"*Shhh!*" Samuel held his finger to his lips. "Look at their clothes. Just three or four uniforms – that don't fit 'em. Them's bushwhackers! In disguise!"

Auggie's upper lip twitched. "You sure?"

Samuel leaned closer. "See the one up front?"

Auggie nodded.

"That's Quantrill!"

Auggie's eyes widened.

Samuel's stomach fluttered. "I seen him in town last year. Pa pointed him out. He told me, 'That there's Quantrill.' He's up to no good."

On the road, Quantrill motioned to half of his men. "Surround the town! Do not let a man escape!" He led the rest into the town square.

Auggie fidgeted with his reins. "What'll we do?"

"We have to warn the farmers!" Samuel clicked his tongue, turned the mare's head, and kicked her with his heels. "Walk the horses real quiet so them bushwhackers don't notice us." The late summer night was cool, but sweat trickled down his neck.

Crack . . . crack! Crack!

"*Gunfire!*" Samuel kicked his mare, urging her to a gallop. Auggie did the same. They rode until they reached the fence line of Samuel's farmstead.

"*Whoa!*" Samuel gasped to catch his breath.

Auggie sat tall. "I'll stop at Beatty's on my way home. Then I'll keep going west."

Samuel motioned in the opposite direction. "I'll go this way."

At home Samuel burst through the door of his frame house. "*Bushwhackers!* Ma! Get up! Wake the girls!"

"What's wrong?"

"Quantrill's in town. Won't be long before his men raid the outlying farms. Take Becky and Sissy and hide in the woods till I come for you."

"The horses!"

"I'll run 'em to the north pasture."

Samuel shooed the girls out the back door. Ma grabbed quilts from the beds. She paused to open her kitchen cupboards and swing the front door open wide.

"Hurry, Ma!" Samuel pushed her toward the door. "What are you doing?"

"Making it easy for those ruffians to find our food. They might leave the rest alone." She put an arm around each girl, and they ran to the woods.

Samuel led the stock out of the corral, past the garden to the pasture. On the road, he looked over his shoulder and squinted in the gray light. He saw no one. At the Robinson place, he dismounted and banged on the door. "The bushwhackers are coming! Get out! Get out!"

A candle flickered on inside. Samuel rode to Old Dooley's cabin and on to the other farmsteads east of town. His muscles ached, but adrenaline kept him focused on his task. At the last farm Old Widow Clamons answered the door barefoot.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am. We need to get you out of here."

Widow Clamons pulled a shawl over her nightclothes.

"Hide in the back of the orchard. I'll get your team."

The woman hobbled toward her apple trees, moving remarkably fast. She waved him away with the back of her hand. "I'll be all right. Get on with you."

Samuel made sure her horses were out of sight behind the last row of apple trees and headed home. He rounded a curve, and his mare shied and snorted.

Two horsemen emerged from the woods. Samuel's pulse pounded in his neck. The men reined in their horses and blocked his way. He chided himself for staying on the road.

"What do we have here?" said the man with a long, dark beard.

The other man laughed. One leg of his britches had a worn hole at the knee. "Looks like a Yank recruit to me. They're taking them younger every day."

Samuel leaned and spit on the ground. "I ain't no Federal."

The Beard chuckled. "Good for you, boy. That's a mighty fine horse you got there. Better be careful of horse thieves."

Samuel shrugged. "Better'n lettin' the recruits get this old nag." Cold sweat broke out on Samuel's brow. "Course I don't want no horse thieves to get her, neither, even though she ain't much. You ought to see the fine draft horses Mr. O'Reilly bought last week."

The men exchanged glances.

"I've been looking to buy some draft horses," Britches said. "Think he'd be interested in selling?"

Samuel scratched his ear. "You could try."

"Where's he live?" The Beard asked.

"Just up the road, sir!" Samuel pointed past Old Widow Clamon's house. "Beyond the apple orchard. Second farm on the right."

Without another word, the bushwhackers spurred their horses.

"I'm sure he's gone to bed by now!" Samuel called after them.

The sound of the men's laughter echoed as they rode out of sight.

Samuel's whole body shook, letting out the nerves he'd held in. He left the road and wound his way home across his neighbors' fields. When he got to the back of his family's farmstead, he found his mother waiting on the creek bank. His sisters were curled asleep on the quilts.

Samuel dismounted. "I got the neighbors warned."

Ma hugged him. "I'm proud of you, son."

Samuel held her longer than usual, for a brief few moments remembering the comfort he'd felt as a child. He broke the embrace. "Have they been here?"

"They're come and gone. What a ruckus! I could hardly keep the girls quiet."

"We'll stay the night here in case they come back."

While his mother and sisters slept, Samuel lay awake listening. He heard only gurgling water and the occasional sound of scurrying night critters. At first light, he found the horses in the pasture where he'd left them. He checked the house before returning to his family.

"They got all the meat from the smokehouse," he told his mother. "Grandma Marie's silver candlesticks are gone from the mantel. But nothing else is moved."

Auggie stopped by late in the afternoon. "Got something to show you!"

The boys walked together along the creek. Auggie pulled out a piece of paper from his back pocket. "My father let me sign up!"

Samuel's jaw dropped open. "He did?"

Auggie grinned, his eyes sparkling. "We went into town this morning and heard what happened. The bushwhackers dragged near twenty recruits out of their beds and shot 'em down like so many hogs."

"Who's dead?"

"They're still makin' a list."

"Go on."

"After the shooting, they rounded up the rest of our recruits and all the men in town. In the morning, they marched the soldiers out of town – stripped to their underwear."

"Kill 'em?"

"Everybody thought so. But around noon, here they come walking back from Squiresville."

"Quantrill let 'em go?"

"He told one of them he got what he came for." Auggie shook his head. "Everything in town's either broke or gone. They filled six wagons. Muskets. Boots. And food, of course. They tore up all the stores and businesses. Except Turpin's Hotel."

Samuel scowled. "Southern sympathizers!"

"My father heard Cliff Turpin was with 'em last night."

"Against his own hometown?"

Auggie nodded.

"What about the farms?"

"They looted all of them. Ours, too. Worse than yours. But nobody out here's hurt."

Auggie slapped Samuel on the back. "Good thing we were around, huh?"

Samuel kicked a rock into the creek.

"You think your Pa will let you come to the war, too?"

"He might," Samuel said. "But I been thinking different about it today."

"Different?"

"With Pa's traveling and all, Ma and the girls need me. And those like Old Widow Clamons. Maybe Ma was right. I need to serve God and country right here at home."