

Charles Ransford “Doc” Jennison

In a December, 1861 letter to his sister, the Union soldier Daniel B. Holmes wrote that he and his fellow members of the Seventh Kansas Cavalry lived *“quite well, not from what we draw from the commissary, but what we jayhawked.”*

Suspecting that his sister, who lived in Illinois, wasn’t familiar with that last neologism, Holmes went on to explain that *“when we are traveling through secesh country we come to the home of some leading secesh, or of some man in the secesh army, then we take his horses and property, burn his house, &c, or as we say, clean them out, well, in the operation we generally get a young hog ... some turkeys, chickens, &c. once in a while a crock of honey, then don’t we live.”*

Charles Jennison was born on June 6, 1834 in Antwerp, New York, in what was known as the “Burned-Over District” because of zealous religious revivals which was an essential element in the abolitionist movement of Upstate New York. When he was twelve-years-old the family moved to Albany, Wisconsin, another hot bed of anti-slavery. He was destined to become a fervid abolitionist. While in Albany he studied and practiced medicine for a brief time. He married Mary Hopkins and in 1855 they had a daughter, Sophia *Jennison* Patton. On the move again, the young family settled briefly in southwestern Minnesota before the family moved to Osawatomie, Kansas. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that John Brown was also a resident of Osawatomie, and maybe it was not. By now John Brown was a notorious and violent Jayhawker and Jennison would quickly follow in Brown’s footsteps.

The next move was in 1857 when Jennison moved to Mound City, Kansas where he joined up with James Montgomery (see earlier article) and participated in “jayhawking” against proslavery people in both Kansas and Missouri. Twice Jennison (Photo at right) gave direct orders to hang proslavery men. In the case of one Russell Hinds, who was “tried” and lynched by Jennison’s posse on November 12, 1860 for capturing and returning escaped slaves to Missouri for the reward, the Kansas jayhawker made no apology. The county, according to Jennison, had *“been infested by a band of desperadoes known as Kidnappers”* for the past year, and it had *“become necessary for us as Anti Slavery [sic] Men to take a stand against”* these increasingly frequent “offences.” Thus, they publicly announced *“that any man found guilty of that crime should pay . . . with his life and accordingly as we had the proof we arrested one Rus Hinds and tried him publickly [sic] and Hung [sic] him for being Engaged in that unholly [sic] business.”* Convinced his position was “honorable and just,” Jennison directed his attacks against Judge Joseph Williams’ proslavery court system of the southern judicial district of Kansas Territory at Fort Scott in Bourbon County. After several free-state men had received harsh treatment from that court, Jennison raised a posse to disperse the court and forced the judge and his proslavery supporters to flee the area in dismay.



When the Civil War broke out, Mound City in February 1861 formed a local band known as the Mound City Guards and appointed Jennison as the captain. During the early

months of the war the Guards patrolled the counties bordering with Missouri below Kansas City. This was not enough to satisfy Jennison's ambitions and in October, 1861, he received authorization from Governor Robinson to organize the 7th Kansas Cavalry which he would command as a new lieutenant colonel. The regiment quickly became known as "Jennison's Jayhawkers and earned the reputation as the bloodiest and most extreme unit operating west of the Mississippi River.

When Jennison exceeded his authority to defend the Kansas border and began to raid against civilians in Missouri, Major General Henry Halleck, Commanding the Department of Missouri' reprimanded Jennison for "*(cross[ing] the line [to] rob, steal, plunder and burn whatever they can lay their hands upon.*" Jennison went into Independence, Missouri and arrested every male which he did release, but kept all their possessions, including their slaves. He was soon doing the same thing to Missouri's proslavery Unionists.

On December 19, 1861, Major General Henry Halleck wrote a letter to General-in-Chief Major General George B. McClellan complaining about the jayhawking perpetrated by Jennison's regiment:

"The conduct of the forces under Lane and Jennison has done more for the enemy in this State than could have been accomplished by 20,000 of his own army. I receive almost daily complaints of outrages committed by these men in the name of the United States, and the evidence is so conclusive as to leave no doubt of their correctness."

Halleck received the following message from Colonel Frederick Steele concerning raiding by Jennison:

"J. W. Smith ... reports that Jennison's men, under Major Anthony, are there [Rose Hill, Missouri], committing depredations upon Union men and secessionists indiscriminately. They have burned forty-two houses in that vicinity and robbed others of valuables and driven off stock.

Mr. Smith says they took his wife's silverware, furs, &c. He estimates the value of property taken from loyal citizens at \$7,000; and, to cap the climax, they shot to death Mr. Richards, a good Union man, without cause or provocation.

He further states the people, except the strongest Union men, are going to Price's army for protection. The force engaged in this business is estimated at 300 or 400. At last account, these banditti were about 50 miles from here. On my advice Mr. Smith started for Kansas to report these circumstances to General Hunter and request him to take measures for the recovery of the stolen property.

I saw a letter from a lady this evening, which was full of taunts, and no doubt many people believe that Jennison is carrying out the policy of our Government.

I would send out all my cavalry to bring in all these marauders, but we are in the midst of a very severe storm, and it is probable that they could not be overtaken within the limits of this State."

Complaints from outraged Missourians would continue to force Halleck to take steps against Jennison's raids:

"I inclose [sic] herewith a copy of a letter from Colonel Steele, commanding at Sedalia, in relation to depredations committed by Jennison's men in Western Missouri.

Similar accounts are received of the conduct of the First Kansas Regiment along the Missouri River, in the counties of La Fayette and Jackson. These men do not belong to this department, and have no business to come within the State. I have directed General Pope to drive them out, or, if they resist, to disarm them and hold them prisoners. They are no better than a band of robbers; they cross the line, rob, steal, plunder, and burn whatever they can lay their hands upon. They disgrace the name and uniform of American soldiers and are driving good Union men into the ranks of the secession army. Their conduct within the last six months has caused a change of 20,000 votes in this State. If the Government countenances such acts by screening the perpetrators from justice and by rewarding with office their leaders and abettors it may resign all hopes of a pacification of Missouri. If Kansas troops are again permitted to come into this State to commit depredations, the State can be held only by the strong arm of military power. The bitter animosity created against these troops is naturally transferred to the Government which supports them and in whose name they pretend to act."

In order to stop the jayhawking, Major General David Hunter issued General Orders No. 17 in the Department of Kansas on February 5, 1862, declaring martial law:

"The civil authorities of Kansas being manifestly unable to preserve the peace and give due security to life and property, and having in various instances notified the general commanding of their inability to uphold the laws unassisted by the military arm, and the crime of armed depredations or jayhawking having reached a height dangerous to the peace and property of the whole State and seriously compromising the Union cause in the border counties of Missouri: Now, therefore, martial law is declared throughout the State of Kansas and will be enforced with vigor.

"... the crime of jayhawking shall be put down with a strong hand and by summary process, and for this purpose the trial of all prisoners charged with armed depredations against property or assaults upon life will be conducted before the military commissions ..."

Even with all the evidence of his regiment's jayhawking, Major General Hunter gave Jennison a promotion on January 31, 1862 to acting Brigadier General. His new brigade would be made up of the 7th Kansas Cavalry, the 8th Iowa Infantry and a battalion of the 7th Missouri Infantry.

Halleck had had enough and decided to send Jennison to New Mexico to fight the Apache. Jennison would submit his resignation on April 10, 1862 and it would be accepted on April 15, 1862. But Jennison was not satisfied with simply resigning. He called together the 7th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry and gave them an animated speech. In the speech, he explained why he had resigned, condemned his Union commanders as being proslavery, and encouraged members of the regiment to follow him in continuing to defend Kansas. Brigadier General Samuel Sturgis ordered Jennison arrested and incarcerated in a St. Louis, Missouri prison. The Jennison propaganda machine started working in earnest. Jennison was never brought to trial. When released from prison, Jennison was hailed as an anti-slavery hero in Kansas.

William Quantrill's infamous raid on Lawrence, Kansas in August of 1863 (see Quantrill article) served to incense and motivate the anti-slavery Kansans. Kansas Gov-

ernor Thomas Carney commissioned Jennison as a colonel because of his extreme reputation and authorized him to organize a cavalry regiment. He would lead the unit for the next year along the order district.

During Major General Sterling Price's raid in the fall of 1864, Jennison commanded a Kansas militia brigade that saw action at Little Blue, Independence, Westport, Marais des Cygnes, Mine Creek, and Newtonia. In December, after Price's forces had retreated from Missouri, Jennison was again arrested for renewed jayhawking there. He was court-martialed, found guilty, and dishonorably dismissed on June 23, 1865.

The Yankee victory in the war gave a great boost to the Kansas political climate and Jennison's sordid past was soon forgotten. He moved to Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1865 and was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives and reelected in 1867. He was then elected to one term in the Kansas Senate.

He died in Leavenworth, Kansas on June 21, 1884 at the relative young age of fifty. He was originally interred in the Greenwood Cemetery in Leavenworth, Kansas. He was reinterred in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California next to his wife in an Unmarked grave.

It is safe to say not everyone agreed with the *Hiawatha World* which described "Doc" Jennison as "*very brave, bright, generous, whole-souled—the warmest and truest of friends. . . . The helping friend of the needy, always and everywhere.*"