

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

William “Bloody Bill” Anderson

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Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Albert E. Castel & Thomas Goodrich	<i>Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage Life of a Civil War Guerrilla</i> . Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998.

Books

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Joseph M. Beilein, Jr.	“The Guerrilla Shirt: A Labor of Love and the Style of Rebellion in Civil War Missouri,” <i>Civil War History</i> 58, No. 2 (June 2012).
Donald R. Hale	<i>They Called Him Bloody Bill</i> . Clinton, MO: The Printery, 1975.
Matthew C. Hulbert	“Constructing Guerrilla Memory: John Newman Edwards and Missouri’s Irregular Lost Cause,” <i>The Journal of the Civil War Era</i> 2, No. 1 (March 2012).
Larry Wood	<i>The Civil War Story of Bloody Bill Anderson</i> . Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 2003.

Organizations

Web Resources

Other Sources

Scholars

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Topic Précis

Bloody Bill Anderson was a prominent Confederate guerrilla chieftain in the conflict that engulfed Missouri during the war. Along with the likes of Quantrill, the Youngers, Frank James, Anderson's brand of warfare involved ambush, rape, espionage, arson, infighting, scalping, beheading, torture, theft, ethnic vendetta, and even outright massacre. The guerrilla war in Missouri was a distinct conflict, separate from the rest of the war and highly personalized but in trying to understand Anderson, readers should beware not to instinctively assume his environment as a moral justification for his behavior. Starting a career as a horse thief before the outbreak of the war, by 1862 Anderson had formed a band of guerrillas and began terrorizing civilians along the Kansas-Missouri border. In 1863 Anderson and his bushwhackers joined William Quantrill's band. He was with Quantrill when Quantrill's force attacked Lawrence Kansas killing between 150 and 200 men and boys in the Lawrence Massacre. In the spring of 1864 Anderson and his most loyal followers left Quantrill's band and set up his own guerrilla company. Throughout the summer of 1864 Anderson's band ambushed, raided and scalped its way across central Missouri. They killed soldiers and civilians, burnt railway property, stole money and military supplies. The pinnacle of Bill Anderson's career as a guerrilla commander unfolded the next day in Centralia, Missouri. On the morning of September 27, 1864, Anderson and a sizable group of bushwhackers (perhaps 60-70) helped themselves to local liquor, looted the town, and robbed stagecoach passengers of their money and jewelry. Soon after, they overtook a passenger train destined for the rail depot in Centralia. Aboard the train, which belonged to the North Missouri Railroad, Anderson and company discovered a group of approximately 20 to 30 Union soldiers. The outnumbered federals were disarmed and removed from the train. Anderson then had nearly all of them executed on the spot. Civilian passengers were subsequently relieved of their valuables and allowed to exit the train which was then set ablaze. Later that afternoon, Anderson and a much larger assemblage of guerrillas (estimates vary between 300 and 700) caught Major A. V. E. Johnston and his 39th Missouri Infantry (Mounted) in a lethal trap. After the morning's slaughter, it did not take much for a small detachment of guerrillas to lure Johnston and his mounted infantry into an open field on the outskirts of Centralia. The field was surrounded by dense foliage on three sides; deep canals (deep enough to conceal men and horses) hid the great mass of Anderson's command. As Johnston and his men rode to the middle of the field, Anderson's force revealed its true size. Wielding revolvers on horseback, the guerrillas charged Johnston's men from three directions. The Union position was quickly swarmed, overrun, and the second massacre of the day at Centralia ensued. Multiple reports indicate that Anderson's guerrillas took scalps and mutilated the bodies of several slain Union soldiers. Major Johnston and approximately 150 of his men died in the battle.

On October 26, 1864 in a mounted skirmish with Union infantry near Albany, Ray County, Missouri Anderson was shot twice in the head and died. Anderson's body was triumphantly paraded by Union soldiers through the streets of nearby Richmond, Missouri. Still clad in his ornate guerrilla shirt and made to clutch a revolver, Anderson's corpse was propped into position for a now famous posthumous photograph. 150 years after his death, Anderson has remained a controversial figure in both academic history and social memory. Critics of Anderson's guerrilla career frequently depict him as having been a glorified cutthroat, delusional, paranoid, and even as a full-fledged sociopath. Others point to the dehumanizing effects of guerrilla warfare as an explanation for Anderson's wartime exploits; they posit that he was not the only guerrilla gradually transformed by his Civil War experience and should therefore not be viewed as exceptional or uniquely deranged.
