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# The Legend of Bill Dark: Guerrilla Warfare, Oral History, and the Unmaking of an Arkansas Bushwhacker

MICHAEL A. DAVIS

THE WAR OF THE REBELLION UNLEASHED a reign of terror, crime, and anarchy in the Ozark foothills of north central Arkansas. There, rival bands of irregulars, along with lawless “jayhawkers” and “bushwhackers,” terrorized a defenseless population. One such band was led by Bill Dark of Searcy County. From June 1862 to January 1863, Dark, Captain of Company A, Coffee’s Recruits, briefly attempted—in accordance with the orders of General Thomas Carmichael Hindman—to sabotage Federal advances in northern Arkansas and conscript state troops. In the end, however, Dark’s efforts only alienated an already hostile population, fueled guerrilla warfare, and hastened his own demise. Indeed, in early 1863, along the banks of the Little Red River near present-day Shirley, Arkansas, Dark and his men were ambushed and killed by a member of a home guard unit. Following the war, Dark’s antagonists—the independent, subsistence farmers of Izard, Searcy, and Van Buren Counties—developed a colorful oral history, associating Dark with “all that is degraded and abandoned in mankind.”<sup>1</sup> A Bill Dark legend—shaped by time, emotion, and association—soon emerged, blurring historical truth, and portraying Dark not as a Confederate irregular but as a deserter and a ruthless jayhawker, a term typically applied to Union marauders.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Bill Dark, though largely unnoticed by most historians, is important to the historiography of Civil War Arkansas in at least three ways. First, it serves as a paradigm of the way the Civil War was waged in Arkansas between 1862 and 1865.<sup>3</sup> Second, it has been the subject of a bountiful

<sup>1</sup>John Hallum, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Little Rock: Tunnah and Pittard, Printers, 1903), 96; David M. Tucker, *Arkansas: A People and Their Reputation* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1985), 31.

<sup>2</sup>As used by Confederates during the Civil War, “jayhawker” described Union guerrillas, outlaws, and soldiers who engaged in acts of looting. Leo E. Huff, “Guerrillas, Jayhawkers and Bushwhackers in Northern Arkansas During the Civil War,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 24 (Summer 1965): 129.

<sup>3</sup>For an excellent analysis of the motives, roles, and effectiveness of Confederate guerrilla operations in Arkansas during the Civil War see Daniel Sutherland, “Guerrillas: The Real War in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Autumn 1993): 257-285.

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and unique Ozark folk tradition. And third, it reveals the power of postwar revisionism and the romanticism of “the Lost Cause” to transform an embarrassing Confederate into a bandit, and, in some accounts, a Unionist.

John William (“Bill”) Dark was born in Arkansas, around 1835. Though his exact origins are unknown, he probably sprang from the numerous Darks who settled south central Tennessee in the early nineteenth century. Dark’s name first appears in Arkansas census records in 1850. That year, Dark, aged fifteen, was living in Little Rock with his mother, Dilla Dark, and a government clerk by the name of James Hutchins.<sup>4</sup> No known record exists of his father. Dark’s life in Pulaski County during the 1850s was seemingly comfortable. He resided, along with such esteemed citizens as Secretary of State O. B. Greer and Sheriff Ben Danby, in the City Hotel on Main Street. Though there are no records linking him with either of the two academies in Little Rock, a letter written by Dark in 1862—the only known manuscript by Dark to survive the war—suggests that he had been formally educated. By the mid-1850s, he was working in Little Rock as a printer. In late 1857, however, Dark’s life took a violent turn, beginning a downward spiral that led to prison and, ultimately, his doom.

On November 8, 1857, Dark was indicted in Pulaski County for the murder of Hardy Foster.<sup>5</sup> Two days later, Dark, accompanied by his lawyers, Absalom Fowler, Henry Massie Rector, John T. Trigg, and Joseph Stillwell, entered a plea of “not guilty.” On January 12, 1858, Dark’s legal council petitioned for a change of venue to another county, arguing that “the minds of the inhabitants of this County are . . . prejudiced against the said defendant [and] that a fair and impartial trial of the issue in this case, cannot be had . . .”<sup>6</sup> Judge John J. Clendenin agreed, and the trial was moved to Saline County, where, on October 22, 1858, Dark was found guilty of second degree murder and sentenced to five years in the state penitentiary. His term was to begin on March

<sup>4</sup>Manuscript Census Returns, Seventh Census of the United States, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1850. A Dilla Dark is listed in the 1840 census for Mississippi County, Arkansas. If it is the same Dark, she was a native of Tennessee, and was between the ages of forty and fifty. Also included in the household were one male between fifteen and twenty, one male between forty and fifty, and two slaves. In 1860, Dilla Dark was still living in Little Rock, continuing to reside with Hutchins. Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1860. The exact nature of this relationship is uncertain. When Hutchins died, however, in 1867, there was no mention of Dilla in either his obituary or his private papers. There is no record of Dilla after the 1860 census—not even a cemetery listing.

<sup>5</sup>*The State of Arkansas v. John W. Dark* (1857-1858), Pulaski County Indictment Records, 1848-1863, Book C, 38, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock. The prosecutor for the state was Attorney General Thomas Johnson. Unfortunately, no detailed record of the case indicating the identity of Foster or the specifics of the crime exist. The only mention of the matter is in indictment and circuit court records for 1857 and 1858, which give only brief descriptions of legal procedures taken on a particular day. Little Rock’s two major newspapers, the *Arkansas Gazette* and the *True Democrat*, failed to report the crime or print Foster’s obituary.

<sup>6</sup>Pulaski County Indictment Records, Book C, 40, 54-55. Arkansas History Commission.

3, 1859.<sup>7</sup> It was there Dark—labeled in prison records as an invalid and marked for bad behavior—found himself when Arkansas seceded from the Union in May 1861. There, too, oral tradition found him.<sup>8</sup>

Oral history is a modern research method that utilizes oral accounts of historical events by witnesses or participants or the information transmitted by them through others.<sup>9</sup> It is not meant to replace old fashioned documentary research, but rather to supplement, enhance, or add color to the facts as recorded in documents. Oral history's value comes in providing anecdotal, human interest evidence often absent from written records. The oral history of Bill Dark, as represented through the writings of John Hallum, Jimmy Driftwood, Dee Strickland Johnson, and Glen Hackett, illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of this method. While oral history supplies a considerable amount of detail about Dark's career that would be otherwise unavailable, such documents as do exist show the oral tradition to be fundamentally misleading as to Dark's wartime activities and allegiances.

The oldest account of Bill Dark's wartime career comes from a small volume of war literature published in 1903 by John Hallum (1833-1907). In *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, Hallum, a writer, lawyer, and Confederate veteran from Tennessee, relied heavily upon information "obtained directly from private soldiers and subordinate officers who served in the various armies of the Confederacy."<sup>10</sup> He intended to glean from common soldiers tales of extraordinary and thrilling events unnoticed by professional historians of the Civil War. In all, Hallum recounted numerous stories, including "The Story of the North Arkansas Outlaws." Hallum based this chapter, which relates the story of Bill Dark, upon interviews with John Hoffman and John M. Robinson, two Confederate veterans who claimed to have witnessed Dark's death.

According to Hallum, Bill Dark was a felon and Confederate deserter, who "congregated a gang of thieves and outlaws to prey on the non-combatant, defenseless people" of Searcy and adjacent counties. "This gang claimed and exercised absolute jurisdiction over every species of property they desired—horses, cows, sheep, mules, fowls, provisions—and in a great number of instances appropriated the last article of clothing belonging to helpless women and children. Many wagons were loaded with plunder . . . His very name struck

<sup>7</sup>Saline County Circuit Court Records, Common Law Book C, 123-124, 126-127, 135, 138, 140-142, Arkansas History Commission.

<sup>8</sup>*Report of the State Penitentiary, 1860*, Arkansas History Commission.

<sup>9</sup>As an organized discipline, oral history dates only from 1948, when Professor Allan Nevins launched "The Oral History Project" at Columbia University. Yet, the essence of the idea is as old as history itself. On the premise that it stems from the oral tradition (that body of lore by which one tribe or family knows of its past through stories repeated from one generation to the next), some scholars suggest that it predates history. See David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 3.

<sup>10</sup>Hallum, *Reminiscences*, 5.

terror into the hearts of women and children and old defenseless men who were unable to pass beyond the sphere of his operations.”<sup>11</sup>

Hallum gave no date for Dark’s demise, noting only that “Whilst matters thus stood, two Confederate soldiers [Hoffman and Robinson], on furlough from the regular Confederate army, visited their families in Searcy County, and on the day of the tragedy following were together with their wives and children at one of their residences. On this day little Master Berry, whose full name has escaped memory, who was ten or eleven years old, came to see his friends from the army and to learn of other Confederate soldiers from the vicinage, some of whom were related to him.”<sup>12</sup>

While the soldiers were visiting with their wives and Berry, one of the matrons, Hallum wrote, kept watch at the door:

In terror and dismay she discovered Dark with five of his gang on horseback approaching the house, with Dark fifty yards in advance of his associates in crime. Terror stricken, she turned pale . . . as she announced their rapid approach on evil bent. The two Confederate soldiers made their exit at the back door and ran . . . through a cornfield to the timber. One of them in his paralysis of fear forgot his army pistol. The little boy Berry seized the pistol and said, ‘Ladies, I will defend you,’ . . . and [then] rushed out in the yard and took position at the corner of the smokehouse, next to the road, and rested the pistol on one of the projecting logs.

By this time Dark was within twenty feet of the lad, staring him in the face, with the ejaculation, ‘What are you doing there, you little puppy?’ The boy was drawing a bead on him . . . [and] scarcely was [Dark’s] sentence out before [Berry] fired. The ball struck [Dark] . . . between the eyes and made an exit at the rear of the cranium. He fell forward dead. The boy said, ‘A center shot, ladies; bless the Lord,’ and in an instant was emptying the remaining five shots at the other thieving marauders who put spurs to their horses and disappeared rapidly.<sup>13</sup>

“Master Berry” was James Hiram (“Jim”) Berry of Middle Settlement, Van Buren County. Born in 1847, Berry was actually fifteen at the time of Dark’s death, and a member of a home guard. Although he never wrote of his encounter with Bill Dark, he did—during the course of his long life—tell his story to, among others, a young graduate from Arkansas State Teachers Col-

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 97-98.

lege, James C. Morris, later known to the world as folk bard Jimmy Driftwood (1907-1998). According to Driftwood, Berry, before his death in 1936, took him to the old cabin where Dark died, and told him many stories, all of which Driftwood jotted down in notebooks. These notebooks have never been published, but a portion of what Driftwood learned is revealed in two Driftwood works: a 1953 "Voice of the Hills" article for the *Mountain View Herald*, and a 1972 recording of a Driftwood original, "The Ballad of Jim Berry."<sup>14</sup> These colorful expressions of oral history, developed by a master storyteller, helped to preserve the Bill Dark story and establish a Bill Dark-Jim Berry legend.

According to Driftwood, Bill Dark was a cruel and ruthless jayhawker, who plundered the Stone County region. In 1862, to counter Dark's threat, fifteen men, led by Christopher Denton, formed what Driftwood referred to as "The Stone County Home Guard" (in fact, Stone County, formed from parts of Izard, Searcy, and Van Buren Counties, was not established until 1873). By early 1863, fifteen-year-old Jim Berry, who had already been threatened by Dark, had joined the vigilante band, which punished all desperadoes and killed many jayhawkers.

In the end, Driftwood noted, Dark and Berry accidentally met along the banks of the Little Red River near Arlberg and Lydalisk.

It was by an old log cabin on the banks of the Little Red,  
 Jimmy Berry killed a big fat hog so the widows could be fed,  
 so the widows could be fed.  
 He was scraping on the bacon, not thinking of defense,  
 When old Bill Dark came galloping up and leaped right over the  
 fence, boys, he leaped right over the fence.

Jim Berry ran around the house 'til he could hardly see,  
 He said, "If I don't kill Bill Dark, it'll be the last of me boys, be  
 the last of me."  
 He flattened out against the wall and took a deadly aim,  
 When old Bill Dark came galloping around, the bullet found his brain,  
 boys, the bullet found his brain.<sup>15</sup>

As Dark's gang scattered in fear, Berry, according to Driftwood, took the outlaw's boots, hat, coat, and guns, and climbed a nearby mountain, sending smoke signals to Denton and his friends.

<sup>14</sup>*Mountain View Herald*, January 15, 1953. Some of Driftwood's papers have been donated to the University of Central Arkansas Archives. At the time of writing, they were being examined and catalogued. "The Ballad of Jim Berry" appears on the 1972 Jimmy Driftwood album, *Down in the Arkansas*.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted by permission of University of Central Arkansas, Ozark Heritage Institute, Dr. David Peterson, director.

One of the most significant aspects of Driftwood's work—at least in how it relates to Dark's character and demise—was his linking of Berry with Christopher Denton and "The Stone County Home Guard." This association might have put connoisseurs of the Dark legend on guard. Denton, born in 1811, was a farmer from Tennessee, who sometime before 1850 settled on Meadow Creek in Van Buren County. He was married and had five children. Though he is credited in folk memory with countering a Unionist jayhawker, two things associate Denton himself with Union sympathies. First, his son William joined the Union army, the Third Arkansas Cavalry, Company G, in November 1863.<sup>16</sup> And second, Denton himself was captain of a home guard in Van Buren and Izard Counties. The purpose of this unit—composed of old men and young boys—was to protect Union sympathizers from marauders and Confederate irregulars. Ironically, though, Denton's group apparently exploited the collapse of law and order, and degenerated into a gang of marauders themselves. Shortly after the war, in a letter written to Union Major General J. J. Reynolds, Confederate Colonel A. R. Witt of the Tenth Arkansas Regiment complained, "it is these squads or companies that you call jayhawkers and marauders, which are very numerous in our country and call themselves independent companies, I object to, headed by Chris Denton, Thomas Kampton, Dick or Nath. [sic] Williams and others, who say what they do is under the direction of the U.S. authorities . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, it was Denton's group that set in motion the events leading to Dark's death in early 1863. According to the late Apsie Sheridan Morrison, Christopher Denton's great grandson, Dark's gang was ambushed along Meadow Creek in Izard County, by Denton's home guard. In all, Dark suffered twenty-four casualties to Denton's one.<sup>18</sup> Dark and five others then fled southwest along the Little Red River toward present-day Shirley, Arkansas. There, at Kenner Slough, Jim Berry waited, and Bill Dark died.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Denton was mustered into service in Conway County on November 21, 1863. Less than two months later, on January 19, 1864, he died in Little Rock of typhoid fever. See Service Record of William A. Denton, Third Arkansas Cavalry (U.S.), Arkansas History Commission.

<sup>17</sup>*The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 48, 844.

<sup>18</sup>James Johnston of Fayetteville, editor of the *Searcy County Ancestor Information Exchange*, and a leading authority on Searcy County during the Civil War, interviewed (and recorded) Morrison in 1963. Mr. Johnston graciously shared the contents of the tape with the author.

<sup>19</sup>Located about four miles south of the mouth of Meadow Creek, Kenner Slough is a slight depression that runs east and west parallel to the Little Red River. Nearly one mile in length, Kenner Slough broadens out into a wide meadow about a quarter of a mile before ending at the Harper Eddy Hole of the Little Red River. Throughout the nineteenth century, several families, including the Kenners, Godseys, Harpers, Smiths, and Bloodworths, lived in the vicinity raising corn and hogs. Today, most of the area is remote and heavily covered with trees—oak, walnut, and pine. The site where Dark was killed, the Godsey place, is today mostly eroded away. There are no signs or markers—only small trees and a few scattered stones.

The identification of Dark and the Unionist Denton as antagonists seems not, however, to have prompted any reevaluation of Dark's wartime allegiances. He was labeled a "Union sympathizer" in Leo Huff's noted article of 1965, "Guerrillas, Jayhawkers and Bushwhackers in Northern Arkansas During the Civil War," published in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*. When the Dark legend again made its way into print in the early 1970s, Dark remained the "King of the Jayhawkers." In September 1973, Dee Strickland Johnson, author of a column for *The Mountain View* weekly newspaper, published three "Holler Logue" articles about Bill Dark: "Dark Days," "More Dark Days," and "Dark Days End." In all, Johnson interviewed twenty-seven "principles sources" in Izard, Searcy, Stone, and Van Buren Counties to produce one of the most thorough accounts of Bill Dark ever printed.

According to Johnson, Dark led a macabre double life. Sometime after June 1862, when his term of service in the regular Confederate army had expired, Dark—who "was good looking, red-headed and . . . wore his hair long"—settled near Timbo, Arkansas, in what is today Stone County. He had a wife named Adeline and a son called "Little Will."<sup>20</sup> Though a husband, father, and captain, Dark still found time to raid and brutalize his neighbors—especially women and children.<sup>21</sup> "The women hated him. If he'd see one walking in the road, he'd jump down off his horse and catch her . . ." Dark also "burned his victim's feet . . . threw hot grease on them and burned out fingernails." On one

<sup>20</sup>Dark lived in a valley near Timbo. The valley, situated between the forks of Panther Creek off Highway 263, is still referred to as "Dark Holler." Rachel Adeline George Dark Martin, daughter of James Sevier and Margaret Stewart George of Izard County, was born in Tennessee in 1845. Sometime after 1860, she met and married Dark, giving birth to a son, William Dark, Jr., probably in early 1863. Manuscript Census Returns, Tenth Census of the United States, Stone County, Arkansas, 1880. In his *Reminiscences*, John Hallum made reference to Adeline Dark, writing "It is the misfortune of many noble women to become wives of degraded men. It was supposed that Dark had confided the custody of the money he had taken from the citizens to his wife, and that by searching his house it might be found and recovered . . . Dark's wife got wind of their intentions before they came. She immediately saddled and mounted a swift mule, took her child in her lap and rode night and day as fast as the animal could travel, more than one hundred miles, striking the Arkansas River at a point near Van Buren where there was no ferry. Undaunted, the heroine plunged into the flood, and the faithful mule with her and child stemmed the roaring tide and landed them safely on the opposite shore, where she experienced the first feeling of relief and safety." Hallum, *Reminiscences*, 99. By 1870, Dark was back in Izard County, living with her parents, and in 1881, she married Benjamin Hugh ("Dock") Martin (1859-1929). Martin and Adeline had three children. On February 8, 1928, Ms. Martin, a member of Big Springs Missionary Baptist Church, died. She is buried in Big Springs Cemetery, Stone County, Arkansas. 1927 Stone County Missionary Baptist Association, 5, Arkansas History Commission. There is no record of William Dark, Jr. following the 1880 census for Stone County. According to local tradition, he moved away after reaching adulthood.

<sup>21</sup>The extent of the physical abuse that Dark's gang inflicted upon women is uncertain. Though the word "rape" was rarely used, the oral history of Bill Dark—with stories of women hiding in hollow logs and tree stumps—seems to suggest that it may have occurred. Michael Fellman has suggested with respect to guerrilla war in neighboring Missouri that "If rape was unusual, extreme brutality toward women was common, including what one might call near rape or symbolic rape, often combined with looting and the killing of men;" Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 207.

occasion, he even murdered two neighbors after they came out of hiding to help their grandmother kill a hog. Dark was also rumored to have killed five or six children near Newnata, and a man named Dancer who was traveling with his family from Tennessee.<sup>22</sup>

Johnson also related—in greater detail than either Hallum or Driftwood—information concerning the day of Dark’s death. According to Johnson, it was one cold morning, probably in the winter of 1864, that Jim Berry left his home near Indian Creek and, with another boy, went to the home of a Mrs. Bloodworth at Kenner Slough on the Little Red River to help her slaughter a hog.

The widow’s sister . . . had died during the night and the body lay in the house awaiting burial. But in times like these even death had to concede to life and the business of the hog took precedence. The fire was burning to heat the water in the scalding kettle and the tell-tale smoke rose heavily in the frosty air. Jim Berry had brought along his little cap and ball pistol and at close range could scarcely have missed hitting the big hog right between the eyes, but the young man was known to be a fine shot and the widow, who had experienced one of Dark’s notorious raids [Dark had filled her ears with hot sweet potatoes when she refused to answer his questions], allegedly asked, ‘You reckon you could shoot old Bill Dark like that if’n he came a-ridin’ in?’ Jim Berry ‘reckoned that he could’ and the process of hog cleaning proceeded.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, two miles southwest of Kenner Slough, Aunt Sally Smith of Bear Branch was being robbed—again. Bill Dark was no stranger to this defenseless woman; he had “visited” her before. This time Dark took her wedding ring. It was there that Dark “heard Jim Berry’s pistol and saw the smoke from the scalding kettle. ‘We will have fresh meat for dinner’ said Bill Dark. Aunt Sally Smith stood on the bluff and watched as they swam their horses across the swollen Little Red River. She rubbed her itching

<sup>22</sup>*The Mountain View*, September 11, 1973.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, September 18, 1973. Johnson, like the others, may have been mistaken about the time of this incident. It was probably early 1863, not 1864. On January 28, 1863, Little Rock’s *True Democrat* noted that “Bill Dark had been wounded and taken prisoner.” Seven days later, on February 4, the paper reported that “Dark, who was said to be taken in Izard county, was badly wounded, and it is not probable that he will live to reach here.” This general time frame (early 1863) seems confirmed by John Hallum’s *Reminiscences*. According to Hallum, Dark was killed while John Hoffman and John Robinson were on furlough from the regular Confederate army. According to Hoffman’s service record, he was furloughed only one time—November 5, 1862 to February 28, 1863. Confederate Service Record of John Hoffman, the Fourteenth Arkansas Infantry, Arkansas History Commission.

finger where her wedding ring had been and wished that old Bill Dark was in hell with his back broke.”<sup>24</sup>

At Kenner Slough, Berry and Bloodworth had just finished scraping the hog when the sound of “horses’ hooves coming fast” caught their ears.

There wasn’t time even to get out of sight. Bill Dark’s gray horse leapt the rail fence with the rest of the gang close behind . . . [T]he widow dashed into the cabin. Young Berry, clutching his pistol, ran behind the house with Bill Dark in hot pursuit. Around the cabin they raced, Jim Berry watching for an opportunity to break for the woods; yet he knew that even if he eluded his mounted pursuer he would be picked off by the armed desperadoes who sat astride their horses idly enjoying the unequal race. Young Berry ‘seed [*sic*] it was him or Dark one,’ so when he rounded the corner where the ‘stick and dirt’ chimney rose, he threw himself breathlessly against the wall.”<sup>25</sup>

Bill Dark, then, charged around the corner and into eternity. “Some say that Dark’s gun jammed—‘the cap had come off one of the tubes and hung in the cylinder and the ball caught and it wouldn’t turn’—[while] others contend that he was trying to remove his glove with his teeth, the better to pull the trigger.” Regardless, Bill Dark was dead, crashing to the ground “‘in a low place where they had dug up clay to patch the chimney.’ Hearing the shot and seeing their leader’s riderless horse gallop from behind the cabin, one of the gang cried ‘It’s a trap!’ and the remaining ‘jayhawkers’ put spurs to their mounts and dashed away.”<sup>26</sup>

Many informants, Johnson reported, insisted that Dark laid “in a state of semi-consciousness for hours after the shooting. The news traveled fast . . . Aunt Sally Smith, who had arrived at the widow’s home, upon seeing her wedding ring on the outlaw’s little finger, ostensibly chopped the finger off to retrieve the ring—‘boiled it before she’d wear it again too’—and Mrs. Bloodworth, recalling the hot sweet potato incident, is said to have ‘kicked him in the teeth.’”<sup>27</sup>

Johnson concluded by detailing the various accounts concerning Dark’s burial. According to some, Dark’s men returned to Kenner Slough and carried the body to Timbo, Arkansas for burial. The most popular account, however, was that the women (Bloodworth, Smith, and others) buried Dark face down under a walnut tree at Kenner Slough. “‘Them women

<sup>24</sup>*Mountain View Herald*, January 15, 1953.

<sup>25</sup>*The Mountain View*, September 18, 1973.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, September 11, 1973.

put him in the grave face down so's he couldn't scratch out,' some maintain."<sup>28</sup>

The most recent account of Bill Dark comes from an unpublished history of Van Buren County by Glen Hackett, former superintendent of Shirley Public School (1953-1978). While "Boy Hero of Middle Fork" (1997)—based largely on interviews with Berry relatives—provides a general overview of Jim Berry's life, it also details an element of the Bill Dark tragedy thus far ignored—interaction between Berry and Dark *before* Kenner Slough.

According to Hackett, Dark and Berry first met at Middle Settlement (present-day Shirley), Arkansas, in October 1862, when Dark hired the young vigilante to tend horses while he and his men rounded up deserters in southern Van Buren County. In the weeks that followed, however, Berry learned Dark's true agenda—plunder. In fact, Hackett wrote, the Unionist jayhawkers developed a plan. When they approached an isolated farm, they sent young Berry to check for any dangers. If only women and children occupied the home, Berry would tell them that he was traveling with a group of crippled soldiers, who were in need of food and water. If food was offered, he went back to where the men were waiting. The group then entered the house, ate a meal, and ransacked the house for jewelry, money, guns, or anything else easy to carry. They avoided homes where a man or an older boy was spotted.

Jim Berry objected to this type of dealing and threatened to return to Middle Settlement. In response, Dark took away his work shoes and made him a prisoner. Three weeks later, Berry, sensing an opportunity at Richwoods (near present-day Mountain View), fled from Dark's ranks, diving into a water hole, and hiding in a canebrake until late afternoon. Berry then returned home to Middle Settlement, where he and his family decided it would be better to move five miles north to Indian Creek. Several months later, Berry met Dark at Kenner Slough.

According to Hackett, Berry became a zealous home guard member following Dark's death, on one occasion tracking down and killing a gang of marauders and leaving their mutilated bodies hanging in a ravine as a warning to others. After the war, Berry remained in Van Buren County, where he farmed, married twice (his first wife dying in childbirth), and raised a family. He rarely mentioned Dark, but as the years passed his thoughts returned to Kenner Slough, and his nerves wore thin. Berry remained armed at all times, and toward the end of his life almost killed a grandchild "when he whirled about to face a rustle of leaves, and a shadow which he mistook for a [jayhawker]. That night he

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., September 18, 1973.

rode to the house of a relative and gave up his gun for the last time.” In 1936, at the age of eighty-nine, Jim Berry died peacefully. He is buried at Rushing Cemetery, Van Buren County, about two miles from the place he killed Bill Dark. The inscription on his tombstone reads “gone but not forgotten.”<sup>29</sup>

In summary, the oral history of Bill Dark presents a Confederate deserter and ruthless plunderer who terrorized defenseless inhabitants of north central Arkansas. In early 1863, Dark—“the worst there ever was”—met his end at Kenner Slough at the hands of young Jim Berry, who with the “heart of a lion and the courage of Ajax . . . Would not bow to Jove for his thunder, nor kneel to Neptune for his trident.”<sup>30</sup> Jim Berry, then, was a hero and Southern patriot—Bill Dark, a bandit and perhaps even a Unionist.

Yet existing primary sources challenge this oral tradition and indicate that Bill Dark was not a Confederate deserter, a Unionist jayhawker, nor a freebooter. Documentary sources, both private and official, confirm Dark to have been an irregular Confederate who (in the spirit of orders issued by General Thomas C. Hindman) implemented guerrilla warfare in Izard, Searcy, and Van Buren Counties. That is not to suggest, however, that Dark was not as infamous as oral tradition suggests. He was no doubt very ruthless. Yet his cruelty was not strictly a freelance affair nor mere banditry.

Records indicate that in early June 1861, Dark was paroled from prison, and by June 15 had gone to Fort Smith, where he enlisted as a private in what became Company F, the First Arkansas Mounted Rifles (C.S.A.).<sup>31</sup> He enlisted for only twelve months, fighting at Wilson’s Creek and Pea Ridge. Following the Confederate defeat at Pea Ridge in March 1862, Union General Samuel R. Curtis led an expedition across northern Arkansas toward Batesville and Searcy. The situation in Confederate Arkansas rapidly deteriorated as the regular army was ordered east of the Mississippi.<sup>32</sup> In June 1862, Dark, his one year of service complete, left the regular Confederate army. Though Dark may have de-

<sup>29</sup>Glen Hackett, “The Boy Hero of Middle Fork,” (unpublished manuscript in the possession of Mr. Hackett), 6.

<sup>30</sup>Hallum, *Reminiscences*, 98.

<sup>31</sup>According to tradition, Dark was pardoned by his former lawyer, Governor Henry M. Rector (1860-1862) in June 1861 on the condition that he join the Confederate Army. Unfortunately, most of Rector’s papers, including his legal notes and pardons, have been lost or destroyed.

<sup>32</sup>According to the Company Muster Roll of the First Arkansas Mounted Rifles, Dark was “present” for July and August 1861, and January 31 to April 20, 1862. The roll for May and June 1862, was dated July 24, and had no remarks concerning Dark’s presence. He was last paid on December 31, 1861. Confederate Service Record of John W. Dark, First Arkansas Mounted Rifles, Arkansas History Commission.

parted without official approval, he did not abandon the Confederacy, as many accounts have suggested.

In her "Dark Days" series, Dee Strickland Johnson, while noting Dark's reputation as "King of the Jayhawkers," asserted that he had remained a Confederate officer and produced a letter written by Dark to prove it. In the letter, Dark identified himself as a captain commanding Company A of J. T. Coffee's recruits. Undated, written in pencil, and probably addressed to Coffee, the message read:

[. . .]furloughed all my men [paper torn] first of July. By order as I supposed of Col. J. T. Coffee.

After you left here I organized an other company J. W. Cypert Capt. I got my men together at the earliest opportunity to proceed to our camp [and] got as far as the mouth of Syllamore when I was called away on Business of importance: left Capt. Cypert in command with orders to march to Mt. Olive & thence in the direction of Salem in Fulton County. After I had attended to the Business referred to and was returning to the command I met all the men of Both companies returning home with furloughs Stating that Capt. Cypert had received orders from you to furlough them: Capt. Cypert was not to be found [and] was gone in the vicinity of Calico Rock: He should have got orders through Judge Edwards of Mt. Olive. Col, I knew if you had ordered furloughs in your absence without some one to approve them that it was an illegal proceedence. But what could I do the men all scattered hell west & crooked Cypert gone to hell or some where else I couldent tell for I never was at Calico Rock in my life. I did not know what to do neither do I till yet let me know by the earliest convenience what I shall do and By God I will do it.<sup>33</sup>

J. T. Coffee was a Missouri Confederate, who, in June 1862, was ordered by General Thomas C. Hindman, commander of the Trans-Mississippi District (June-August 1862), to conscript state troops. By September, Coffee had 800 to 1,200 irregulars, including Dark, under his command. Union General Curtis called them "the most despicable, rough, ragged rascals ever congregated together."<sup>34</sup> Though Coffee was controversial—

<sup>33</sup>*The Mountain View*, September 4, 1973. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of Dark's letter is presently unknown. In a conversation with the author in 1995, Ms. Johnson, now a resident of Arizona, speculated that the letter may have been in the possession of Maggie Berry Duncan, daughter of Jim Berry. Mrs. Duncan is no longer living. If the daughter of Jim Berry did indeed have the letter, it would only seem logical to assume that it must have been on Dark's person at the time of his death.

<sup>34</sup>OR, ser. 1, vol. 13, 61-63.

Hindman had him arrested and court-martialed for drunkenness—his knowledge of the country and the unbounded confidence of the people in him made him a valuable asset to the Confederate cause in northern Arkansas.

Dark's letter showed, then, that he had not deserted the Confederate cause either to become a Unionist or a free lance plunderer. Instead, like many other Arkansas Confederates, he left the regular army to join irregular companies. Dark had a specific role within Confederate military operations in Arkansas—he was a guerrilla leader under the direct command of J. T. Coffee. His overall mission included driving out the invader, ensuring adherence to the Confederate cause, and in the words of General Hindman, sacrificing "all property valuable to the enemy which may by possibility fall into his hands."<sup>35</sup>

Another document also suggests Dark remained active and loyal in the Confederate service. Lemuel Holsted of Searcy County, Arkansas, was a member of the Arkansas State Militia, which tracked down and arrested members of the Peace Society in December 1861. Sometime later, according to family history, Holsted joined with Bill Dark, and in May 1865, was shot and killed by Union forces for his association with the so-called "King of the Jayhawkers." Holsted's widow, Miranda, seemed to confirm this in applying in 1901 for a Confederate pension on the basis "That he [Lemuel Holsted] was a Confederate soldier. Belonging to William Dark's Company, McCray's Regiment of Cavalry. That as such a soldier he [Holsted] served from 1863 to 1865."<sup>36</sup>

Dark's command was—his letter revealed—undisciplined. This was not unusual. Writing from the region in 1864 (one year after Dark's death), Confederate General Joseph O. Shelby found "the entire country overrun with able-bodied men; recruiting officers quarreling or sunk in total apathy; predatory bands of thieves roaming over the country at will, killing some, burning the feet of others, and all hungering with the lust of robbery; one officer refusing to report to another, no organizations, no discipline, no arms, no leader, no desire to fight, no anything."<sup>37</sup> This kind of reckless independence undermined Dark's ability to lead. Indeed, his command was scattered, confused, and literally walking away. Dark experienced the great dilemma of Arkansas's guerrilla war—independent

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 830.

<sup>36</sup>From John E. DePriest's "Proof of Service" statement, dated June 8, 1901, in Miranda Holsted's Confederate widow's pension papers, Arkansas Confederate Pensions Record, Roll 44, Arkansas History Commission. DePriest was a County Clerk of Searcy County at the time of his statement. Holsted is sometimes spelled "Halsted."

<sup>37</sup>OR, ser. 1. vol. 34, 928.

action, so coveted by Arkansas soldiers, bred confusion, inefficiency, and defeat.

Though Dark was credited with every sort of atrocity from robbery to murder, such actions did not necessarily transform him into a freebooter or “land pirate.” He may simply have been executing (though perhaps too enthusiastically) the unpopular “slash and burn” policies mandated by General Hindman in June 1862. Following Coffee’s success at Lone Jack, Missouri, General Hindman, a Rector Democrat, secessionist, and Delta slave owner, embraced the use of independent companies to defend Arkansas. Overall, these companies were to “resist the enemy to the last extremity, blockading roads, burning bridges, destroying all supplies, growing crops included, and polluting the water by killing cattle, ripping the carcasses, and throwing them in.”<sup>38</sup> Such policies inevitably generated resentment and resistance among the rugged subsistence farmers of the Ozark foothills—many of whom had resisted secession in the first place and many others of whom simply wished to be left alone. As early as July 1862, one Union officer wrote “The rebel forces under McBride, Schnable [*sic*], Coleman, Crabtree, Hindman, and Bledsoe . . . [are] in camp east of Yellville . . . . They are enforcing the conscript law, and a majority of the citizens . . . are very indignant and much opposed to the law. Much suffering prevails among them. They [i.e. the rebel forces] have plundered and murdered Union citizens until forbearance ceases to be virtue . . . Guerilla warfare is now the order of the day.”<sup>39</sup>

Bill Dark was a part of that violent order. Scorched-earth policy doubtlessly earned him the enmity even of many civilians supportive of the Confederate cause—to the eternal detriment of his reputation. That his actions, as cruel and capricious as they might have been, continued to be carried out as part of the Confederate war effort is suggested by a letter to the editor of the *True Democrat* signed by Lt. Colonel John A. Schnabel, a German-born engineer and commander of Confederate forces along the northern border of Arkansas.<sup>40</sup> In January 1863, the Little Rock paper reported that Dark was a jayhawker, even incorrectly associating him with the highly publicized murder of DeRosey Carroll, a noted secessionist, in Charleston, Arkansas.<sup>41</sup> Writing from Carroll County on

<sup>38</sup>Bobby L. Roberts, “General T. C. Hindman and the Trans-Mississippi District,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (Winter 1973): 303-304.

<sup>39</sup>*OR*, ser. 1, vol. 13, 461-462.

<sup>40</sup>Schnabel moved to Arkansas from Virginia, where he claimed to have participated in the capture of John Brown at Harpers Ferry. In the 1880s, Schnabel built the Salado Bridge in Independence County. *Arkansas Gazette Sunday Magazine*, June 16, 1957; John Schnabel and Salado Bridge Subject File, Arkansas History Commission.

<sup>41</sup>Carroll was actually murdered by Martin Hart’s band; William Sawyer, “The Martin Hart Conspiracy,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 23 (Summer 1964): 159-160.

April 27, 1863, Schnabel and his officers—perhaps unaware of Dark’s demise—denied the report, writing:

We, the Undersigned officers in the Confederate service in Northern Arkansas, learning that reports have been circulated and matter published prejudicial to the loyalty and bearing of John W. Dark, a citizen of this State, and a brave and daring soldier, as an act of justice to the said Dark, we would state, that he has been in Col. Schnabel’s [*sic*] cavalry recruits for several months, on the borders of this State, and has been in nearly every border fray that has recently occurred. No one has acquitted himself more gallantly and displayed more deeds of daring than John W. Dark. Under the most discouraging circumstances, when others were desponding, he has been ever active, bold and determined in arresting the progress of vandals, who have been desolating this portion of the State. We have never entertained a suspicion of his loyalty, but on the contrary, have recognized in him, a bold, driving and determined soldier, and one who has risked his life under the most severe trials for his country.”<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, Dark appears to have been a ruthless bushwhacker employed by the regular Confederate army in Arkansas. What is interesting, however, is how few would prove as willing as Schnabel and his men to embrace Dark as a rebel. Instead he was usually remembered as a deserter and sometimes as a “jayhawker.” The latter characterization in some cases involved the use of “jayhawker” and “bushwhacker” as synonyms, though “jayhawker” has traditionally carried Unionist connotations while “bushwhacker” referred to the meanest sort of Confederate guerrilla. But the muddying of Dark’s allegiances may have been a consequence of the deliberate effort by Southern romantics to write history that inspired devotion to the memories of the “heroic [Confederate] sires, whose martial renown, sacrifices and endurance stands unsurpassed in the history of the world.”<sup>43</sup> Soon after the war, former Confederates began writing their reminiscences, constructing a heroic “Lost Cause” interpretation of the conflict, and ascribing certain attributes, such as selflessness, nobility, and honor, to the Confederacy as a whole. To these Southern revisionists, Dark, who waged guerrilla war and plundered Southern property, must have seemed

<sup>42</sup>*True Democrat*, May 6, 1863. In addition to Schnabel, E. G. Mitchell (Capt.), J. J. Eoff (Lieut.), S. W. Stigleman (Lt. & Adgt.), John P. Norvell, (A. Com’sy), G. J. Overall (O. S.), W. W. Hudson (Lieut.), and D. A. Winter (Lieut.) signed their names to this letter to the editor.

<sup>43</sup>Hallum, *Reminiscences*, 3.

an embarrassing Confederate, and thus no Confederate at all. Almost inevitably, he was remembered instead as a traitor and disgrace.

Toward the end of his discussion of north Arkansas outlaws, John Hallum told a story about an unnamed youth from Searcy County, who joined a gang of outlaws probably sometime in 1862. The young man's father, an old Baptist preacher "who was universally esteemed for his piety and consistent following of the gentle Nazarene," went to his "wayward son in tears of grief and fervent prayers of sorrow, beseeching him to abandon the ways of sin that led to death and an immortality of suffering and sorrow." But the son had become infatuated with his new life of degradation and shame. Later, this outlaw band, including the old gentleman's son, was ambushed, captured, and hanged by a home guard. Though racked with grief, the pious father, according to Hallum, concluded, "that it would be solemn mockery of Christianity to surround [his] burial with a halo of purity and innocence, and with the nerve of a Roman of the iron age said to the executioners, 'His death is justified in the sight of God and man; throw his dishonored body in the trench with his comrades in crime.'"<sup>44</sup>

The way the Confederacy chose to wage war in Arkansas tarred the reputations of many of the men who executed the guerrilla strategy. Bill Dark's war was neither noble nor honorable. Instead, it was dirty, ugly, and controversial, exploiting the land and punishing the people. "Lost Cause" romantics would have mocked the image of the Confederacy that they had so carefully constructed had they surrounded Dark and his ilk with a halo of purity and innocence. Like the old gentlemen from Hallum's *Reminiscences*, Southern revisionists would also say of Dark: "His death is justified in the sight of God and man; throw his dishonored body in the trench with his comrades in crime."

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 101-102.