



## **Charles Harrison (And the Confederate cause in the Colorado Territory)**

**By Patrick Gerity**

May 15th, 1863, a band of 20 soldiers is attacked and decimated by an Osage Indian force of over 200 braves, on the Verdigris River in southeastern Kansas. During the battle 2 braves and 18 white soldiers are killed, while 2 of the soldiers barely escape with their lives and flee to Missouri. Interestingly enough this skirmish on the prairies of Kansas involved Confederate designs on the Colorado Territory. To understand the ties between an Indian battle in Kansas and the relation to both the Confederate States of America and the territory of Colorado we must go back 4 years prior to the newly formed boomtown of Denver City.

Soon after the exaggerated stories of gold discoveries caused the “Pike’s Peak or Bust” gold rush of 1858-59, the townships of Auraria and St. Charles were growing at the confluence of Cherry Creek into the South Platte River. By 1859 the two towns had merged together forming Denver City in honor of then governor of the Kansas Territory, James W. Denver. Into this upstart town arrived a gambler named Charles Harrison (Charley). Harrison drifted in from Salt Lake City with a partner, Tom Hunt, and was rumored to be pursued by a Mormon posse due to some horse stealing activity in Utah. Harrison was described as a Southern Dandy in his dress and mannerisms, not one to start quarrels but always prepared to fight if necessary. Charley would stroll about with two Colt pistols strapped to his sides, and reportedly knew how to use them.

Soon after his arrival in Denver City, Harrison set up a base of operation in the Criterion Saloon near present day Larimer and 15th Streets. The Criterion was considered the most lavish saloon in Denver City, as its name suggested it was the standard of excellence in a rough and tumble frontier town. This level of finery suited Harrison very well and he immediately rented a faro table and within a year owned a stake in the saloon. The Criterion became “the” sporting saloon in the town, attracting both the best and worst citizens of Denver City. During this same time tensions between North and South had reached a boiling point within the country. Denver City was not immune to the fever of patriotism as settlers came from both northern and southern states, tending to bring their loyalties with them to the West. Charley Harrison became a magnet for many of the more devout Southern sympathizers and in time a leader among that group of citizens.

While Harrison’s outward appearance and general demeanor reflected that of a Southern Gentleman, it was reported by some that he had a homicidal side to his personality, with numerous notches on his Colt revolver barrels. Several fatal shootings were attributed to Harrison and the Rocky Mountain News had written several articles criticizing Harrison. One evening some of Harrison’s associates dragged the newspaper editor, William Byers, into the Criterion for retribution, but Charley helped Byers escape with his life. Harrison’s followers became increasingly bold and troublesome as 1861 dawned. They became known as “Bummers” and were considered a fairly lawless element within the area. In response to the activity of the

Bummers, a vigilance committee was formed by other citizens. With the news of the fall of Ft. Sumter on April 13th, the situation became much more volatile between the Bummers and vigilante group.

April 24th, 1861, Denver City awoke to find the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy flying from a flagpole atop the Wallingford & Murphy store, next door to the Criterion Saloon. A crowd gathered to fill Larimer Street in front of the store with Southern Sympathizers applauding the flag while Unionists shouted demands to tear the flag down. Tensions mounted as a group of Unionists attempted to storm the store only to confront Charley Harrison and an armed group of Bummers at the door. A standoff ensued for some time as each group tested the resolve of the other, but fortunately cooler heads prevailed. The flag remained on the pole for the day but was removed that evening. Another story says a Unionist climbed the outside of the building during the standoff and removed the banner, which the crowd tore to shreds and stomped into the ground.

In addition to the flag-raising, Southern Sympathizers were becoming much more active throughout the territory. John Moore (a former Denver mayor) and James T. Coleman had started a rival newspaper to the Rocky Mountain News, called the "Daily Mountaineer." They used the paper to write anti-Union editorials, provide counterpoint to pro-Union Rocky Mountain News articles, and in general warn territorial Southerners of the pending atrocities the federal government would impose upon the Southern states and its supporters. Also during this time many men of Southern origin either began returning to their home states to enlist in the Confederate Army, or began organizing themselves into quasi-units within the territory to train and eventually merge with a Confederate Army close by or possibly within Colorado. This activity caused great worry for the Lincoln appointed leadership of the territory and paranoia began to rule the leadership and guide their actions.

In addition to Confederate worries, the territory also had to worry about the so called "Indian Problem." Since the beginning of the United States the white man had been pushing the Native American population further and further west, as well as confining many tribes onto reservations. By 1861 many eastern tribes had been relocated to the Indian Territories of present day Oklahoma. White settlers had also begun to intrude into the areas of the plains and western tribes which had caused several incidents and conflicts. In October 1861, General Albert Pike of the Confederate Army had negotiated a treaty with several of the tribes located within Indian Territory including the Cherokee, Osage, Creek, Choctaw, and Seminole. Many of these tribes provided troops for the Confederate cause but it also divided the tribes and others supported the Union and caused a mini-civil war among several of the main tribes. Farther west the Arapahoe, Cheyenne, and Kiowa had no such treaties and still openly roamed the high plains as they wished. In Denver City rumors began to spread when bands of Southern Cheyenne (under Black Kettle) and Arapahoe (under Little Raven) camped along Cherry Creek near the town. Fear and panic spread as people allowed racism and a general lack of understanding to rule their thoughts and stories. Rumors said that the band had attacked Fort Wise and soon planned to attack the town. Other rumors said that Rebel sympathizers were selling guns and alcohol to the natives and persuading them to attack Denver City as well. It did not help when small unruly groups of natives did drink too much and stole from a few ranches and placer mines in the area. In the end, several Mexican settlers were arrested for providing the liquor to the group and immediately

things quieted down with no further attacks on white settlers. Unfortunately the attitude of the whites was already tainted by the fear and misinformation. This would result in deadly consequences a few years later on the banks of Sand Creek.

Now back to Charley Harrison and his band of Bummers. By the summer of 1861 rumors developed that a stash of weaponry was being collected at the Criterion Saloon for arming the Southern Sympathizers. In addition it was noticed that many men were abandoning their mining claims and heading east to join Confederate forces in Missouri, Tennessee, and Virginia. Indeed many of Harrison's Bummers had gone east to enlist in the Confederate Army. Those who remained in Denver City set to work actively promoting the Confederate Cause, sometimes working clandestine operations, and in general, raising hell as the Bummers had a reputation for doing. The Bummers also harassed the soldiers of the newly formed 1st Colorado whenever possible. Fears once again peaked among the territorial citizens with word of General Sibley's Army of New Mexico advance up the Rio Grande.

In Denver City the Bummers and some 1st Colorado soldiers got into a fight in the Red Light District, with the soldiers coming out the winners. Harrison would not stand for his men being beaten and organized a group to teach the soldiers a lesson. The Bummers beat up a guard at the 1st Colorado barracks, which in turn resulted in soldiers going to the Criterion the following evening and a brawl ensuing. During this fight shots were fired wounding two of the soldiers. The soldiers surrounded the saloon while the Bummers took up positions within ready for a full scale battle. The situation escalated as the soldiers brought up a cannon and aimed it at the Criterion's front door. The town marshal and deputies eventually broke up the fight before the canon was fired, and Charley Harrison was arrested. He was soon released though by a friendly court.

After this, most Confederate activity went underground. Charley Harrison and his associates began to quietly buy up the supply of percussion caps in the territory, leaving a shortage in Colorado. This activity alarmed the Union authorities who ordered the entire population of Denver to be disarmed, and Territorial Governor William Gilpin issued orders for all Confederate sympathizers to be arrested. These actions were the final straw and southerners, including Charley Harrison and Mayor John Moore, began leaving the town en masse. A large group including Harrison moved south towards Texas and stopped along the Santa Fe Trail, in hopes of plundering unsuspecting federal wagon trains. Union leaders in Denver found out about the plan and sent a force to intercept the party. They found the band waiting for wagons along the trail and promptly arrested the group and returned the prisoners to Denver. Very soon after the group escaped from jail due to a sympathetic jailer and the lot of them headed south as fast as they could. Harrison moved towards the Missouri/Arkansas border to join the Confederate Army by the fall of 1862.

For the next few months Harrison would participate in several battles along the Missouri/Arkansas border. He gained an appointment as Captain in Colonel Emmett MacDonald's Missouri Calvary, fighting at Cane Creek, Arkansas (November 29, 1862), and Prairie Grove (December, 1862). He was promoted to Lt. Colonel in December as well. On January 8, 1863 Lt. Col. Harrison took part in the siege of Springfield, Missouri. When the siege was abandoned, Harrison remained in the area leading various guerrilla units and finally

wintered in northern Arkansas. While in winter camp Harrison learned of the exploits of the Missouri guerrilla fighters and met men like Bloody Bill Anderson, George Todd, and William Quantrill. Encouraged by the successes of the Missouri fighters, Harrison began devising his own plans for similar activity on the vast expanse of territory between Missouri and Colorado.

During the winter of 1863 Harrison was able to obtain a commission to full Colonel from Major General Theophilus Holmes, District Commander of Arkansas. Harrison's goal was to enlist a core group of leaders from the Confederate Army and move westward into Colorado where they would recruit and train soldiers for the Confederate cause as well as encourage Native American groups to take up arms against the pro-Union elements throughout the territory and eastward into the Great Plains. If not creating all-out war, he could at least disrupt commerce and cause much fear and distraction in the far west which could siphon off Federal troops from eastern fronts to deal with unrest in the Great Plains. By May, Harrison had recruited 19 volunteers for his mission. The group of 20 included two Colonels, one Lt. Colonel, one Major, four Captains, and the rest Lieutenants. They had high expectations for the expedition including the establishment of a Confederate Calvary unit in Colorado.

On May 14, 1863 the party slipped out of southwest Missouri onto the Osage Indian reserve of southeastern Kansas and made at least 60 miles, crossing the Neosho River and making it almost to the Verdigris River. The unit was wearing blue coats and would have appeared to be a patrol of Kansas Calvary out of the nearby town of Humboldt. On the 15th, the group was again on the trail westward when a small band of Osage Indians found their abandoned camp and decided to take up the trail and see who was crossing their territory. When the Osage overtook the party the men tried to pass themselves off as US troopers but the Osage were familiar with every soldier stationed at Humboldt and asked the men to ride with them to Humboldt to clear things up. When the group refused to go with the Osage and continued riding away the Indians attempted to restrain the men, with one of the whites pulling his pistol killing an Osage brave. The rest of the Osage bolted away to return to their camp and alert the tribe of the altercation that had just occurred.

The Osage leader, Hard Rope, mobilized a force of 200 warriors to head out in pursuit of the band of whites. Hard Rope's warriors caught up to the troopers near a bend in the Verdigris River, near present day Independence, Kansas. In the first attack the Osage lost one warrior to the white's long range rifles, regrouped and attacked again on two fronts, killing two of the whites. The blue coated men realized they were outnumbered significantly and made a break for a patch of timber near the river, dismounted, and waded to a sandbar in the middle of the river. There they made a desperate last stand against the Osage warriors, fighting until they ran out of ammunition and then swinging their rifle butts as clubs. The skirmish continued until all the white lay dead in the sand, and the warriors then scalped, mutilated and took anything of value from the corpses. The tracks of two men could be seen walking off down the river, but the warriors could not find anyone further after searching both banks for some time.

After the battle Hard Rope became concerned that indeed these men might have been a detachment out of Humboldt, so he sent messengers to the Union outpost at Humboldt to request that Captain Willoughby Doudna come to the Osage village to confer with Hard Rope. Captain Doudna and a mounted unit proceeded to the village to hear the Osage's story concerning the

battle, and eventually visited the battle site to confirm the identity of the men and bury their remains. There they found and buried the two men on the plain where they fell, then proceeded to the river where they saw the bloody sandbar and 16 decapitated corpses. All the men had been scalped except Charlie Harrison, who was bald, so the warriors took his beard instead. The Kansas troopers buried the men in a mass grave still unaware of their identities. Upon returning to the Osage village, the soldiers witnessed a scalp dance as the Osage celebrated their battle victory and the loss of two warriors. Upon inspection of the captured clothing and equipment it was quickly determined the killed men were Confederate, and Hard Rope turned over paperwork which confirmed the unit was composed of commissioned Confederate Officers, commanded by Colonel Charles Harrison on route to Colorado territory. Unknowingly the Osage Indians had done an invaluable service to the Union army and prevented a possible Confederate and Indian uprising in the Colorado territory.

Of the two sets of tracks leading away from the battle site, years later it was determined that Colonel Warner Lewis and John Rafferty had luckily escaped the massacre. Both men had used the near bank under the Osage as cover and proceeded to crawl about a mile upstream and hid until dark. The two men endured hardships and several close calls as they walked back to Missouri over the next week. Shortly after returning to Missouri John Rafferty was killed, leaving Warner Lewis as the only survivor of the expedition. Lewis reported to Major Thomas Livingston in Diamond Grove, Missouri, who relayed the story of the expedition's failure to General Sterling Price. Lewis lived to the age of 81 and died in 1915, having recounted his story many times.

On the windswept prairie of Kansas, 18 unmarked graves lay in silent testimony. What had begun as a grandiose plan to change the course of the War ended in a hardly noticed skirmish on the western frontier. A little over a month later the Confederacy would experience staggering defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. It is impossible to speculate as to what affect Charlie Harrison and his expedition might have had upon the overall course of the War. By the summer of 1863 the War was moving into the heart of the Confederacy and the Trans-Mississippi region was becoming less important to the overall outcome of military operations for both sides.

Had Harrison and his officers been successful at recruiting a Confederate cavalry force in Colorado and inspiring plains tribes to actively strike at Union forces in the west, it certainly would have caused great panic and fear regionally, diverting Union troops from New Mexico and Kansas to deal with the situation. While this probably would have had little effect on operations east of the Mississippi River, it certainly could have assisted in a dreamed second invasion of New Mexico by General Sibley and in General Price's Missouri invasion in 1864. One can only imagine the possibilities that a unified Trans-Mississippi Confederate Army might have been able to achieve after Appomattox.

