

Sam Hildebrand

Introduction

With the outbreak of hostilities in Missouri and the implementation of martial law, corruption emerged. In some cases, those who sympathized with the Union were so horrified by the abuses of military power that they became secessionist. The story of Samuel Hildebrand is one such story. Sam was born January 6, 1836, near Bonne Terre, Missouri. He attended school for only one day, learning just the first two letters of the alphabet. Thereafter he learned how to shoot a weapon, a skill he would use with deadly results during the Civil War. Sam's family was pro-Union during the early secession crisis in Missouri. The Hildebrands did not own slaves, and Sam's brother William fought with the Federal army during the war.

Event

During the early months of the war in Missouri, both Union and pro-Confederate state militia troops "pressed horses" into military service. Sam and his brother Frank were accused of taking a mare belonging to Firman McIlvaine, a Union sympathizer and activist. Later, Sam's cousin took a horse belonging to a member of a local pro-Union "vigilance committee" and traded the horse for one belonging to Sam. Although Sam denied knowledge of the theft, the vigilante group led by McIlvaine vowed to have its revenge on the Hildebrand brothers. Sam and Frank hid in the woods near Sam's estate for several weeks before Frank decided to enlist in the Home Guard to prove his loyalty, while Sam moved to Flat Woods in St. Francois County. The captain of the Home Guard unit turned Frank over to McIlvaine and the vigilance committee, who promptly hanged him and threw his body into a sinkhole, not to be found for weeks.

While in St. Francois County, a neighbor informed U.S. troops at Ironton of Sam's presence. They surrounded his house and burned it to the ground. Sam escaped from the house but was hit by a ball that went through his calf and below his knee, breaking his leg and making it impossible to run. Sam covered himself with leaves until the soldiers abandoned their search and in his pain vowed to join the Confederacy in order to have his revenge. There were many Southern sympathizers in St. Francois County, who called themselves the "Knights of the Golden Circle," and they were instrumental in transporting Sam to the Confederate camp of Gen. M. Jeff Thompson.

Aftermath

Gen. Thompson gave Sam a major's commission in the Confederate army along with explicit instructions on how to operate in the state. Sam was not given any troops and had to recruit his band himself, usually men who had grievances with Union troops or local military authorities. Furthermore, he was to report to Gen. Thompson every six months. On June 1, 1862, Maj. Sam Hildebrand began his

personal war on Union sympathizers in southeast Missouri and became a “desperate and unscrupulous man” who “wreaked a terrible vengeance upon those who had been his enemies, shooting men down in their fields and by the wayside, burning houses and outraging women.”