

## Divided and Torn

As the year 1861 began, Missouri confronted the coming Civil War with divided emotions. As a border state, Missouri's people found themselves racked by deep internal divisions and conflicting loyalties. Toughened by a rough-hewed frontier heritage, Missourians entered the war with a willingness to fight. Even if the enemy might have been a neighbor, or even a brother. In the summer of 1861, with the war only a few months' old, this terrible, fighting spirit would be unleashed in the bloodiest battle that had yet been fought on American soil.

Imagine, it's just before dawn, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1861, this valley is filled with 12,000 Confederate troops. Most are in tents sleeping, there are a few moving about. One of their commanders, General Sterling Price, is right here, having his breakfast in front of his headquarters. All of the sudden, a messenger comes galloping this road screaming, "The Union troops are coming! The Union troops are coming!" But Price doesn't believe him. He knows that the Union commander, General Nathaniel Lyon is 10 miles north, waiting for reinforcements in Springfield. A few minutes later, Price hears gunfire. Suddenly he realizes that the bloodshed is about to begin. Here. At an otherwise unremarkable place called Wilson's Creek.

The road to Wilson's Creek began seven months earlier, with the inaugural address of newly elected Governor, Clayborne Fox Jackson.

Missouri will not be found to shrink from the duty which our position on the border imposes. Her honor, her interests and her sympathies point alike in one direction. And determine her to stand by the south.

Before Jackson could lead Missouri out of the Union, he would need to build an army, and needed the weapons of war. The federal arsenal in St. Louis, with its vast store of 40,000 muskets, 90,000 pounds of powder and 40 cannons, was the prize that would determine Missouri's ultimate loyalty. Jackson wanted those guns. Standing in his way was a union commander named Nathaniel Lyon, a man of fierce determination. Lyon would rather die than yield up a single gun to this secessionist. By May 10, 1861, Jackson had assembled a brigade of State Militia in St. Louis at an encampment named in his honor, camp Jackson. Suspecting their intentions to seize the arsenal, Lyon marched 7,000 German-American troops out to the camp, surrounding it, and forced its surrender. While the Federals were preparing to march their prisoners away, an angry mob assembled and began to taunt the Federal troops. A shot rang out and a Federal soldier fell mortally wounded. The Federals fired back. Suddenly, 28 people were dead, all of them civilians. Wide-spread public outrage followed. Jackson immediately issued a call for volunteers to resist further Federal atrocities. Former Missouri governor and Mexican War veteran Sterling Price stepped forward to command them. Price and Jackson needed time to train the thousands of eager volunteers and find guns to put in their hands. To buy time, they met with Nathaniel Lyon at the Planters House Hotel in St. Louis and attempted to convince him that all they wanted was neutrality. Lyon's response was chilling.

Rather than concede to the State of Missouri for one single instant, the right to dictate to my government in any matter, however unimportant, I'd see you, you and you, and every man, woman and child in the State dead and buried. This means war.

Strong words. Some call Lyon a fanatic. Others admire his conviction. What do you think? What if he would have changed his tone that day? Can one person shape history, or change it?

Governor Jackson and General Price hastily left the planter's house and boarded a train for Jefferson City. Fearing that Lyon was hot on their heels, they burned the railroad bridges behind them. Unionist sentiment ran strong in Jefferson City and Jackson decided to evacuate the capitol and establish a temporary government at Booneville. Lyon had meanwhile moved up the Missouri River by steamboat and on June

15<sup>th</sup>, occupied the Capitol. Two days later, he fell in Jackson and his poorly organized state guard troops at Booneville and routed them. Jackson, Price and several thousand state guardsmen then retreated to southwest Missouri where they hoped to organize a resistance force with regiments from Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas. Lion followed them as far as Springfield. Lion wanted to smash the Missouri secessionists before they could mount a serious offense. So he decided he had to strike first, even though he was outnumbered two to one.

John Ray and his family lived in this house. That morning, the kids went down to the creek to get the horses as usual. A stranger rode up and yelled, "They'll be fighting like hell here in ten minutes!" So the kids rushed back up to tell their parents. As they did, their father saw Union troops across the fields. Then he heard gun shots. So he had his wife and kids go into the cellar to hide. But he stayed on the porch. For a while it seemed as if the Union troops were going to win; but a serious mistake changed everything. Let's go check it out.

When the battle began, Colonel Franz Segal entered the battlefield from the south. This is Jeff Patrick from the National Park Service. Jeff, what happened next?

While General Lion and his troops were attacking the northern end of the Confederate encampment, Colonel Segal brought about 1,200 of his men into this area, around the Joseph Sharp farm, to block this end of the battlefield. He's here in position at about 8:30. He sees troops in gray marching towards his line, he assumes that they are the first Iowa regiment--a regiment that was dressed in gray, but was fighting with General Nathaniel Lion's army. He holds his fire until it's too late, those troops get within about 40 yards and then Segal realizes his mistake. They're actually the 3<sup>rd</sup> Louisiana regiment, not the 1<sup>st</sup> Iowa, and those Louisianans fire a volley into his line. Segal's men are very quickly routed off this portion of the field, that left General Nathaniel Lion to fight it out alone on bloody hill.

As Segal and his men fled towards Springfield, Lion and his army of Missourians, Iowans and Kansans were doggedly holding their ground and fighting with deadly intensity. Repeatedly Prices' men surged and drilled Lion's men back; repeatedly the federals counter-attacked and regained their lost ground. The battlefield became shrouded in the dense smoke of cannon and rifle fire. This was not a battle of artful tactics or brilliant maneuvers, but of brutal and murderous fighting. One of every four union soldiers fell, but they killed or wounded an equal number of their rebel foe.

Eugene Woehr, an Iowan soldier with Lion, described the scene that day:

Every man was shooting as fast as he could load. And yelling as loud as his breath would permit. We had paper cartridges, and in loading, we had to bite off the end. Every man had a big quit of paper in his mouth and down his chin ran dissolved gun powder. The other side was yelling. If any orders were given, nobody heard them.

How do you think you would feel if you were up here, and a couple hundred people with guns were shooting at you? Peter Lane, a Texan, was among the confederates firing up at Eugene Woehr's regiment.

Sheets of deadly musket and mini-balls came pouring through our ranks, tearing the grass and bushes, throwing the dust and gravel in our faces, crippling our comrades and killing our friends. The fearful and terrific storm of death was raging around. Here, amid this horrible scene we still maintained the deadly and unequal contest, murdering and being murdered.

With Segal out of action, the Confederates were able to move troops forward to reinforce Prices' battered men. Lion had no reinforcements. By mid-morning his men were exhausted and low on ammunition. The situation was becoming desperate. A shell exploded near by killing Lions' horse and wounding him in three places. Then, another group of charging Confederates appeared. A Kansas regiment

surged forward to meet the attack and Lion mounted another horse shouting “Come on my brave boys, I will lead you forward.” Suddenly a volley of lead poured into their ranks and many men went down. One of them was Nathaniel Lion.

A bullet pierced his heart and he slid from his horse into the arms of his orderly, Private Ed Leeman. And he said, “Leeman, I am killed.” Nathaniel Lion was the first Union General to die at war, in the North he was held as a hero, and a martyr. Do you think he was a hero, or merely a fool for leading his men up against a foe that outnumbered him 2 to 1? What exactly does it mean to be a hero anyway?

With the death of Lion, any hope of Union victory ended. The battle lasted for perhaps another hour before the Federal troops were able to slip away to Springfield. The six hours of hard fighting had left Confederate victors too exhausted to pursue their defeated foe. One weary soldier summed up the situation, “It was a mighty, mean fought fight.”

The final toll of Wilson’s Creek was frightful. Of the 5,400 Federals in the action, 1,317 fell. The Confederates threw 10,200 men into the battle, and lost 1,230 of them. Any soldier who marched to Wilson’s Creek with his head full of visions of glory and easy victory, now knew better, for the slaughter had only just begun. By the time it was over, 14,000 of the 110,000 Missourians in blue who marched to war never came back. Of the 40,000 Missourians who wore Confederate gray, 1 of every 6 would die for that lost cause.

Sterling Price had won the battle at Wilson’s Creek. Five weeks later he gained another victory at Lexington, but his four year dream of conquering Missouri for the confederacy never came to pass. The Federal’s iron grip never loosened through all the terrible and bloody fighting to come. In the end, Lion’s lost the battle, and he lost his life, but he won a very important struggle for Missouri. Here, at Wilson’s Creek.