Violence and Deception: The Outlaw Career of Ben Bickerstaff
By Carol Coley Taylor

In a world gone awry with revolutions, natural disasters, and assassins making the nightly news on a regular basis, it is fitting to recall another desperate time in Northeast Texas when Confederate soldiers and guerillas returning from Civil War with no intention of acknowledging defeat or becoming reconstructed created an environment of hate, destruction and terror for all former slaves and Union supporters.

As early as March 7, 1865 the *Galveston Daily News* reported that Clarksville was said to be infested by roving bands of guerillas plundering the county and its people. By August 10 of the same year the *Daily News* reported that newspapers all over Texas were commenting on the "rapid increase of crime, with accounts of robberies, murders, and lately, wholesale arson. Men of all grades seem to have entered on the career of crime and doubtless find it profitable since they commit their deeds without impunity."

In 1866 Judge Albert H. Latimer of Red River County wrote "that never in the days of slavery has there ever been known the wrong, the outrage, the oppression that now exists in all the Northeastern counties of Texas towards the poor Negroes. More downtrodden and brutally treated, blacks have no rights whatever that are respected." The same conditions prevailed in Bowie, Fannin, Lamar and other surrounding counties.

Traveling through twenty-nine counties in eastern and northeastern Texas, Freedman's Bureau inspector William H. Sinclair reported that for the Union man and the freed people of northern Texas life was pandemonium itself. Beaten daily and shot indiscriminately by gangs of cutthroats that infested the county, the two groups received

no protection. Civil law was dead; sheriffs and judges watched while murderers came and went at will.

Another Bureau official C. S. Roberts wrote later that after a trip to Clarksville that outlaws ravaged the area even before the appearance of the Ku Klux Klan in mid to late 1867. He acknowledged difficulty ferreting out reliable information about these lawless men, determining their whereabouts and tracking their movements. A network of spies, friends and allies, along with many intimidated citizens, kept them apprised of any and all arrest attempts. No criminal had been convicted in over a year and there had been only one conviction in the (past) decade for a capital crime (horse stealing).

These outlaws did not rob banks, trains or other institutions. They preyed on freedmen, Union men, and Union Army personnel, those who were involved with changing the racial and class status quo of the area. Many believe that there was a predisposition to violence in the region. Shootings, brawls and whiskey enhanced that inclination toward conflict.

One of these lawless men was Benjamin F. Bickerstaff from Grey Rock in Titus County. The twenty-one year old Bickerstaff was considered a hotshot eager for war when he and his brother volunteered in the Titus Guards to join Colonel William C. Young's regiment of Texas State Troops for the purpose of invading the Indian Territory and capturing the three federal forts there while convincing the Five Civilized Tribes of their need to join the Confederate State of America. In May 1861 the men moved across the Red River for their first taste of war. The regiment returned to Cooke County in late September where most of the men were mustered in to the 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 11th Texas Cavalries.

While the Bickerstaff brothers became part of Co. H, 11th Texas Cavalry, many of the men with whom they served in Indian Territory became members of Sul Ross's Brigade but later followed the desperado Bickerstaff after the war. The 11th Texas Cavalry was separated from the other three regiments after the Battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas and became part of the Army of Tennessee.

Taking part in the battle at Murfreesboro, Ben Bickerstaff was seriously wounded. He later rejoined his unit in the Tennessee-North Carolina border area where the first known accounts of his viciousness were reported. Tales from former company members indicate that while on forage patrols, Bickerstaff made his white victims either stand in scalding water or held their feet to a fire to make them tell where any valuables might be hidden. About this time he was demoted from rank of Forage Sergeant to that of Private.

While on patrol in the mountains of East Tennessee in late January 1864, Ben Bickerstaff was captured by the Union Army near Sevierville and sent to Rock Island Prisoner of War Camp. Little is known about Bickerstaff's POW experience except that he was scheduled for transfer to Point Lookout, Maryland for exchange on March 29, 1865 along with 500 other POWs. At this point, all Military Service Records for Benjamin F. Bickerstaff cease. There is no parole record or Oath of Allegiance. It can be speculated that Bickerstaff never got on the train to Point Lookout but made his way South through Missouri, Arkansas and Louisiana.

Reports of the day and the only surviving photograph indicate that Ben Bickerstaff was a small man with blonde hair and fair skin who liked to dress up and frequently wore bow ties. It is said that he could be a true gentleman with the most civil

manners. With his looks, manners and experience in foraging, he likely would have been able to charm or steal his way into clothing, food and a horse.

By spring of 1865 he was riding with Cullen Montgomery Baker and Ben Griffith in Arkansas and the extreme northeastern counties of Texas. Local history tales in Titus County indicate that Bickerstaff killed a freedman in or near Shreveport and had to cross into Texas for safety. *The Galveston Daily News* in the spring of 1865 reported that Federal Troops had arrived in Shreveport and the city was glad to be rid of the Texans who had robbed and murdered as well as created an environment of lawlessness there.

The tax rolls for Titus County in 1866 indicate that Seaborn Bickerstaff gave his son Ben 350 acres of land as he had done for his older son before the war. Perhaps the family hoped that young Ben would settle down. By 1868 Ben had acquired 721 acres of land in southwestern Titus County where he paid taxes on horses. Brother James who had been regimental butcher during the war now operated a saw mill; the parents, from all indications, were respected members of Grey Rock society. Seaborn Bickerstaff was a member of the Grey Rock Masonic Lodge from 1857 to 1867. He was a carpenter until the mid-1850s when he inherited a large amount of land from his two older brothers, both early Titus County pioneers.

Yet Ben continued his running with Cullen Baker and Ben Griffith and became acquainted with Bob Lee of the Corners Area of Hunt, Fannin, Grayson and Collin Counties along with lesser known cutthroats. Baker, Bickerstaff and Lee would become known as the Unholy Triumvirate throughout the region. Until the arrival of Federal Troops in 1867, the northeast corner of Texas was virtually without civil or criminal law enforcement. The general consensus, expressed by the Navarro County judge was that

these men were “Confederate soldiers, Southern gentlemen and all they had done was kill ‘niggers’”.

To counter this attitude, Brevet Major General J. J. Reynolds, U. S. Commanding Adjutant General, recommended that “Union troops be stationed at many county seats, until by their presence, and aid if necessary, the civil law can be placed in the hands of reliable officers, and executed. This will be the work of years, and will be fully accomplished by an increase of population.”

One of the first places occupied by Federal troops was Mount Pleasant, county seat of Titus County. Major Samuel H. Starr and his men of the 6th U. S. Cavalry arrived in 1867. Starr reported in November that it was expedient to evacuate all freedmen from the area before they were completely annihilated. In his January report, Starr acknowledged no change for the better. The disloyal element “has a confident expectation of soon being able to re-enslave the freedmen.” Starr expected another rebellion at “no distant date.”

By this time, Ben Bickerstaff had moved his gang from Titus County to the thickets of White Oak Creek just north of the present day Sulphur Springs in Hopkins County. From this point they were able to range the entire area of Northeast Texas. Throughout the area, friends and allies, along with those persons he and his gang had intimidated into abetting them, fed the outlaws, warned of danger, provided horses and forage and safeguarded them. The thickets provided an ideal hiding place where few ever ventured for fear of outlaws or of becoming lost.

An interesting story was told to Judge L. L. Bowman of Hunt County in the 1920s by an attorney in Delta County. It seems the attorney was a small child in the late 1860s

living on the family farm that included twenty acres of orchards and vineyards. It was his duty to take food from the family kitchen, place it inside his shirt, go to the vineyard and place the food in a hand if one appeared out of the grapevines. The attorney attributed the "hand" to Lige Guest, Simp Dixon, Bob Lee or Ben Bickerstaff.

In June of 1868 Bickerstaff and members of his gang robbed six blacks in Navarro County, were arrested and jailed in Corsicana but released because no Justice of the Peace would indict them. They then robbed five more black families, stole four horses and shot two blacks. After July 4th, Bickerstaff was back in Hopkins County where Joe Easley, Freedmen's Bureau Agent, reported a race war on with Bickerstaff heading it. This time women and children were being killed as well as freedmen and Unionists. The wounded died for lack of medical care as local doctors were either afraid to treat blacks or would not treat them of their own volition.

Ben Bickerstaff is reported to have met an older freedman in the vicinity of Grey Rock and told him to spread the word that thereafter he would kill any former slaves not working in Titus County. During the same period Bickerstaff killed several freedmen in Grey Rock and massacred a house full of freedmen along Cypress Creek.

Unionist Lige Reynolds lived in Hopkins County west of Sulphur Springs prior to the war. In 1862 he made his way to New Orleans to enlist in the Union Army as his beliefs would not allow him to embrace the Confederacy. After the war he returned to his family and farm in Hopkins County. On one occasion after making a trip into Sulphur Springs he was attacked on his return home. Reynolds was found four days later in the thickets shot in the back with his faithful dog beside him. Bickerstaff and his men were suspects but no evidence was produced and the case dropped.

On August 10, 1868 Company H of the 6th U. S. Cavalry from Fort Richardson arrived in Sulphur Springs under the command of Captain T. M. Tolman. Tolman set up camp in town by renting a building to be used for barracks and hospital, a large stable, blacksmith shop, a few other buildings and a large vacant lot. Officers were quartered at a hotel diagonally across the street.

Four days after the arrival of the troops a report was received late one afternoon that an African American woman had been beaten by Bickerstaff's men four miles west of town. Tolman immediately sent a squad of seven men to investigate. On their return the squad was ambushed by Bickerstaff's gang who used tactics learned from Confederate Calvary units throughout the war. A Union sergeant and private were killed.

Instantaneously Bickerstaff stepped up his attacks on the Federal troops. Tolman reported at the end of August that the desperados in the vicinity had openly declared war and called on citizens to either side with the United States Government or join them.

On August 15, Bickerstaff and his men attacked a train of commissary wagons outside Sulphur Springs for a second time in less than a month. The outlaws gave the drivers receipts for the stolen goods, paid for the wagons and hauled away all the commissaries. The drivers were safe because they were not Federal soldiers, but honest men trying to make a living, according to Bickerstaff.

Ben Bickerstaff actively organized several Democratic Clubs to control votes. These "clubs" held barbeques to indoctrinate freedmen in voting matters and to point out those federal government supporters marked for murder. Freedmen agreeing to vote as

instructed were given passes to move through the countryside unharmed. Those chosen for murder quickly fled the county, leaving the outlaws in greater control.

In the August 28th issue of *The Texas Republican* in Marshall, the following item relating to Bickerstaff appeared: "One of the County officers of Paris, proposes to have found the subjoined notice sticking on a tree on Sanders Creek in Lamar County and published it in the (Paris) *Vindicator*. . ."Notice is hereby given to all it may concern that Biggerstaff (*sic*) & Co., and Bob Lee & Co. will visit this neighborhood on the 12th inst., and will continue from day to day until the Radical Party is exterminated or shows a perfect willingness to support the democratic party for any and every office whatever, this notice is principally intended for Charles Lee, and the other colored gentry living between Red River and Sanders' Creek (in south Lamar County). All that cannot comply with the order had better hunt holes in the earth at once. We hope that all those who belong to the Conservative Party will sustain us. Yours, Friends to the Constitution and enemies to Congress."

Shortly after the arrival of the Federal troops in Sulphur Springs, young John Vaden, one of Bickerstaff's men, raced down the streets of town and fired his pistol at Captain Tolman who was sitting on the gallery of the hotel. The bullet missed the captain by about an inch.

Tolman reported that the state of the county was much worse than open war for the desperados, not only outnumbered his troops, but fought from the brush so that he could not send out details without sacrificing his men. Bickerstaff and his men knew the territory and rode fast horses. In addition, the desperados surrounded the post with two to

five hundred men who made all manner of threats. Food, water and wood were cut off. Sulphur Springs was in a virtual state of siege.

About this time Tolman erected a stockade on the large vacant lot in the middle of town. Soldiers and officers were moved inside the stockade that was also used as a jail. Tolman issued orders that any civilian bearing arms in the city limits must register them and on most occasions, relinquish the fire arms while in the city. In addition, Tolman ordered that all liquor must only be sold by the glass and not the bottle.

In late September Captain A. R. Chaffee arrived with two more companies of the 6th U.S. Cavalry from Fort Richardson under orders to rid the area of Bickerstaff and his men. Chaffee's Guerillas chased Bickerstaff over one thousand miles during the next three months. At the same time, General J. J. Reynolds placed a $1000 reward on the heads of Bob Lee, Ben Bickerstaff and Cullen Baker, each.

At one point in early October Colonel W. B. Pease, also at Sulphur Springs, reported two attempts had been made to set fire to the town. The officers feared the worst as the presidential election was forthcoming. Pease reported that the "whole people of the region, with few exceptions, were organized into Ku Klux Clubs, fully officered and thoroughly armed." Pease recommended hiring spies.

By this time, Bickerstaff and his men were ranging as far as Hill and Johnson Counties south of Fort Worth. In mid October Chaffee left Sulphur Springs with a company of men to make arrests in the Sabine Bottom. On the way he met a stranger who told him that Bickerstaff had crossed the Sabine with Taylor Bowman and a man named Porter. Chaffee then turned toward Grey Rock, home of Bickerstaff's father. Bickerstaff was three days ahead of him. After surrounding the Bickerstaff home, the

troops arrested Bowman while Bickerstaff and Porter made their escape. However, Bickerstaff's father and three other gang members were arrested. Chaffee immediately left for Hillsboro in Hill County where Bickerstaff had a home and considerable livestock. It was Chaffee's intent to seize the cattle and horses for restitution of stolen Army goods.

By the end of the month Chaffee reported to have captured five horses and three mules from Bickerstaff but that upon arriving at his home near Hillsboro, he found Bickerstaff away. The rest of Bickerstaff's livestock were inferior and not confiscated. However, Chaffee learned that Bickerstaff was now using the names Wilson and Jones.

Lt. Josiah Chance of the 17th U. S. Infantry reported an interesting experience with Frances Bickerstaff, Ben's mother. While on scouting patrol civilian clothes, he and his detachment arrived at the Bickerstaff home in Grey Rock where Chance told the family his men had escaped from the Sulphur Springs stockade. The mother confided to them that her son had not been home since his father was arrested but that Ben intended to go to Mexico. She then gave Chance advice how to travel through the country in order to escape detection.

By December of 1868, Seaborn Bickerstaff was released from the Sulphur Springs stockade on a bond of $3,000 with three sureties for his good behavior. Col. Pease expressed sympathy for the elder Bickerstaff and considered him quite an old man, very infirm, and suffering from pulmonary disease who could not physically tolerate the hardships of confinement and approaching winter weather.

The arrival of the New Year found Bickerstaff in the vicinity of Hill and Johnson Counties using the name of Thomas and riding with his old acquaintances Josiah or Joe

Thompson and ex-Confederate Major Cathey implicated in the robbery of Major E. M. Heath on the 20th of January. Heath, sheriff and deputy assessor and collector for Johnson County was on the way to Austin when relieved of $2,800 in state tax money. The local newspaper reported that Heath and Cathey were traveling to Austin together but an official version of the robbery indicates that Heath started for Austin alone, was intercepted by Cathey who distracted Heath on the road to Hillsboro long enough for Bickerstaff and his men to rush to the scene and take control. The guerillas made off with the money, Heath's two Derringer pistols and watch. Heath survived but came under suspicion as a part of the gang when he refused to go after them even with warrants.

As the winter turned into spring, Bickerstaff and Thompson regularly rode into the small town of Alvarado at dusk to drink, carouse and shoot up the town. By April, the townspeople were tired of them but were at their wits' end how to stop the harassment. It was finally decided that the shop owners would arm themselves and when the notorious duo rode into town, they would ambush the desperados. The plan was set for Monday, April 5, 1869. Thompson and Bickerstaff dismounted to a fuselage of bullets that showered the streets. Thompson died immediately. As Ben Bickerstaff lay dying in the streets of Alvarado, Texas, he told his assassins that they had "killed one of the bravest men of the South."

Yet in the next few days and weeks newspapers throughout Texas and the United States were referring to the episode as the end of the "notorious desperado" Ben Bickerstaff. With Baker and Lee shot earlier in 1869, Ben Bickerstaff became the last of the Unholy Triumvirate to suffer death. His was the only death to result in claims for the

$1,000 reward. A group of Alvarado citizens rode to Waxahachie the next morning to hire an attorney to represent them in their claim. They wanted the world and especially their children to know they weren't gunman, but concerned citizens ready for peace. The reward was given to them and used to construct the first public school in the town.

Read at Annual Conference, East Texas Historical Association
September 2005