"Quiet!" I told myself, listening to my ragged breath catching in my throat, and my heart thumping madly within my breast. As I gratefully leaned against a large oak that provided a place with which to make my final stand, I gave a furtive glance down the dry dirt path I had just run. I grimaced. My wet footsteps, from having plunged pell-mell across Bee Creek, were a dead giveaway. My adversary, if paying attention, would surely know where I was hiding.

But no time. The crashing of underbrush told me that my brother was quickly approaching. Steeling myself, I gripped my gun more tightly, and waited as the footsteps came near my position.

"Bang!" I shouted, springing from around the tree with my gun pointed at my older brother William. "I got you! You're dead!"

William, only a short distance down the path, dodged to the left and whipped out his own weapon - a stick sword. "You missed, you dirty Jayhawker!" He shouted back, surging forward to knock my stick gun from my hands. Grabbing me around the neck with his superior strength, he stuck his sword at my side. "Surrender or die." He hissed in my ear.

I writhed furtively, attempting to get away, and began to whine. "You cheated. I got you and you know it. I'm telling father if you don't let me go."

"Go ahead" William laughed, releasing me and whacking me on the bottom with his stick. "Pa won't give no sympathy to a Free-State lover."

That was in 1859 - a time seen by some as the "Golden Era" of Platte County, Missouri. Father, who in years prior had been involved with men like Senator Atchison in the Platte "Self-Defensive Association," had once been active in protecting our people from Kansas aggression. But as things settled down, so did Dad. Meanwhile, hemp (used for rope and clothing) was selling for good prices, and

Settlers and businessmen - eager to earn their fortunes in the west - looked to places like Platte City for mules, wagons, and supplies.

But in less than a year and a half, that had all changed - not only for us, but for our friends and neighbors too. My uncle, who became annoyed with my Father over his beliefs toward our fragmenting nation, ended up returning to Kentucky with his slaves - thus nearly bringing

financial ruin upon my folks. But worst of all was when Mother died from pneumonia in March of 1861. As Gov. Claiborne Jackson debated with General Lyon over Missouri's future, Father was burying his wife and our mother. And while the South seceded - it was all we could do to keep the farm running. So when Will lashed out at Pa, and left home in July after hearing of the Confederate triumph at Manassas - it was a little understandable. Shoot, at times I felt like doing the same.

"He's 17. I reckon he's man enough to figure things out," father wearily grumbled in the latter half of August, 1861. I was helping him in what was left of our field (after raiding parties had ridden through), and we had taken a break beneath a shade tree. "Though, I could sure use his help right about now," he said with a small smile.

I wiped the sweat from my brow, and took a drink from our water bucket. Looking out over our field, I could see in the distance a number of slaves toiling in the hot sun. Through the buzzing of insects, I could hear the wafting melody of one of their songs carrying across the still air. For a moment, my mind wandered to recent issues of our local paper - the *Platte County Conservator*. After a particularly vehement writer spoke of various locals who'd been denounced as Abolitionist, Father opened up on the subject. At one time, he believed that the States would eventually emancipate as England had done. But after Northern men seemed to consider John Brown's attempt at slave insurrection as "saintly" – Father, like many others around here - began to regard this hypocrisy as the behavior of an enemy.

"I bet if Dorris was still here, he'd be trying to sell you a slave," I said with a wry grin, recalling an incident last March involving the controversial Platte County slave-holder. When Mr. Wilson had hung a national flag from the window of the courthouse, it was Tom Dorris who had torn it down. This caused some ill feelings towards Dorris, and he left for St. Louis.

Father chuckled. "You know, I never had anything personal against Dorris, but he seemed a tad on the hot headed side. Still, the way things are ending up, it seems everyone is getting an itchy trigger finger these days," he muttered, rising to his feet with a stretch. "That reminds me...when you saw your brother Will in town last Saturday, did he say anything about his friends?"

"No, but he did say I should think about joining Gordon's men," I replied pointedly, in a

tone that betrayed my feelings of joining the fight with my older brother.

"Son, you know I have no issue with Will wanting to protect our rights with honorable men. But it's this friendship with that troublemaker Si Gordon that sets me uneasy," he growled. "Lord knows I did some things in my younger days that I'm not proud of - but as usual, Will doesn't give any regard to what his Pa thinks."

"But he thinks you should've agreed to help Col. Winston raise a company for the South. They need men with your experience. And then maybe Will would come back," I said, pretty sure Father would be unconvinced by this argument.

"I would son, truly. But this farm meant a lot to your mother, and it's become our home." He turned his gaze toward the setting sun, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully.

What could I say? We all had given much for our home here, and I understood Father's apprehension. But the pressure to act in the face of adversity, both in our individual lives, and in the life of our community, was simply too much to ignore. However, for now, I could not bear to bring my Pa, who had been through so much already, any further grief.

"Come on Father. We better get back to work. Only a few hours of daylight left," I said, heading back to the field with my rake.

In the days following, we hoped things wouldn't get any worse. But on August 31 of 1861, they did. General Fremont issued a proclamation confiscating all property, and emancipating the slaves of so-called Missouri "rebels." Naturally this didn't make folks around here too happy, as this only reinforced the notion of a too powerful Central Government, which blatantly disregarded our Constitution and the elected leaders of our State. As for immediate emancipation – well, we didn't really know what to expect the slaves to do. Some believed this could lead to a bloody revolt similar to what Nat Turner had tried to accomplish years before – and we all know how that turned out!

In early September, we were hit with the horrible news of the Platte River Disaster in nearby Buchanan. Eighteen civilians were killed when the bridge was purposefully weakened, and the train plunged into the river. Some say this action was taken in an attempt to keep Federal troops out of St. Joseph, and that bringing injury to civilians was a tragic accident of war – not, as the

Northern Press would have you believe, an act of the devil-loving “Secesh”.

In mid-September, Father and I had went into Platte City hoping to pick up a few supplies, and found the town buzzing over a possible detachment of Federals heading our way. With talk of Si Gordon seen riding through the area, Father visited one of the local taverns to inquire after William. I was busy leading our mule to a water trough, when a motley crowd of about 70 men and boys noisily rounded a corner, and began making their way up the street. Following them was a man known as Captain Carr, who immediately noticed me gawking.

"Boy!" He shouted, waving his pistol at my father's musket. "Grab that gun and fall in line!"

Experiencing a moment of indecision, I simply stood staring as Carr hurried after his men. But then I thought of what Will would think of his little brother fending off a hoard of blue-coats, and I made my decision. As my hands reached out to take Pa's musket, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Father. He appeared to be about to say something, when a horseman galloped past in a cloud of dust.

"The Federals are crossing the bridge!" The horseman shouted.

Down the street, Captain Carr's men, who were assembling in a rough line to receive ammunition, seemed to turn their faces as one at the announcement. A few moments passed, and then a young boy, possibly 11 or 12, took off running. Suddenly everyone in the group had broken formation and scattered.

As we watched the ill equipped and ill trained boys, farmers, and local businessmen quickly disperse, Father looked me steadily in the eye. "A lot of these people, including me, don't want any trouble," he replied. "A handful of men and boys, while admirable, isn’t going to hold off a superior force - all it'll get us is our property destroyed in retribution. Now let's get back home."

Making our way back to our home on Bee Creek, we heard several rounds of cannon fire echoing through the hills. I swallowed the lump in my throat, thinking of Will, and wondering if he was standing with Si Gordon and his men, defending the town when no one else would. Maybe William understood more than Father thought he did.

The next day, Father rode into town to inquire of news, and came back after I had finished my chores. While we sat down for a meager lunch, he reported that he'd found the town looted, and that Mr. Paxton (a local lawyer) had informed him that it had all been the work of a Col.

R.P. Smith of the 16th Illinois Infantry. In addition, he stated that Si Gordon and his Bushwhacker lieutenant, Black Triplett, had met the Federals before they'd entered into town. Although doing little more than harass, they had managed to kill a St. Joseph physician from a covered position, and escaped without any harm to themselves.

Things were fairly quiet for several days after, until the afternoon Father and I were returning with several mangy looking rabbits we were hoping to cook into a stew. Setting down on the front porch to skin the animals, we heard a welcoming shout rise up from the lane beyond. It was William!

"Hello!" Will called, thundering into our front yard as if he'd only been gone for an hour - instead of two months. Father leapt to his feet, his eyes glad at the Prodigal Son returning. As William brought the horse to a halt before our porch, he jumped off, and threw me a saddle bag with his familiar grin.

"Corn," he said. "It's not a lot, but it'll get you by for a time."

Father eyed the pack, suddenly suspicious, and looked to his older son. "Stolen from another helpless family, no doubt," he said, looking to the line of trees near the road. "Who else is with you?"

"Come on, Pa!" Will exclaimed, turning to cast a high-pitched whistle towards the road. "You should know there are plenty of folks in the area who are glad to help us. As for those who aren't, well - we only take what we need."

Upon receiving Will's signal, several rough looking men a few years older than my brother, rode into the yard. One of the men tipped his hat to my father, and another alertly kept his musket at the ready.

Father paused for a moment, and lifted his hands in a calming manner. And then, unable to resist a small smile of relief at his son's safety, he reached out to place a hand on Will's shoulder. "Will, you know I'm glad to see you again, but we can't afford any more trouble. The blue-coats learn you're here, and everything we've built here will be smoldering ashes by morning."

"All we need is a couple nights to lay low," Will stated cockily. "'Cause right now, Billy-Yank is all a-flutter over Price, and it's a fair bet he'll chase 'em back to Lincoln. Then none of us will

have to worry."

I looked at Father, and knew he wouldn't say no. It was one of those traits that finally drove my uncle away. But it was also one of those qualities that our mother loved in her husband, and which made him well liked in town.

"All right - I guess it'll do no good to argue with you. Certainly we've had enough of that already," he agreed. "But you tell Gordon he owes us one."

Time passed, and for a brief time we hoped that with Sterling Price's victory at Lexington, the Confederacy would bring stability throughout Missouri. But as the Missouri State Guard turned southward for the winter, Father reluctantly figured it would be wisest to move into one of the abandoned homes in town. I'd seen Father cry when he buried mother, and it was now that I saw him shed a tear once again as we packed up the family Bible, and mother's oak chest her Father made in Kentucky. Will, who had shown up to help out, tried to make me feel better by telling me to keep an eye on the Yanks while we lived in town. If I did, maybe Gordon would make me a lieutenant someday.

Meanwhile, in late November, General Hunter sent a squad of soldiers from Fort Leavenworth to apprehend Dr. Beaumont, Mr. Cox, and several others who were considered guilty of Southern leaning. With them came numerous "Red-Legs" and thieves, who helped themselves to every valuable they could find. General Hunter then issued an order to several of the local leaders, including Mr. Paxton, J.R. Burckhartt, and Mr. Cockrill, and demanded that Silas Gordon be delivered up, or driven from the county. If we refused, he'd lay waste to Platte County by burning every home, and liberating every slave. When Paxton suggested that General Hunter had no power under the Constitution to do so - the General replied with, "Damn the Constitution!"

Not long after, Major Joseph was travelling from Platte City to Weston with his cannon and camp-equipage. Captain Carr had learned of this movement easily enough, and gathered in ambush on the southern side of the road - east of Bee Creek. As the Federals approached, they were fired upon by Carr's men, and two of the Union boys were killed. In response, Major Joseph retired a short distance with his cannon, and opened fire on the bushwhackers. Little

damage was suffered by the Platte City men, but the trees in the area had been harshly mangled by the cannon's grape-shot.

Eager for retribution, and understanding that Platte County was still infested with "rebels," Colonel Morgan arrived in Platte City on December 16 with about 75 men. Morgan, who seemed excited from the moment he set foot into town, took up headquarters at the Fleshman House, and reportedly called a secret meeting with his officers.

No one seemed to know anything of what Morgan's men were up to, until around midnight when Father shook me awake. The town was on fire!

Quickly pulling on my shoes, I stumbled out the door after Father and we ran toward the hellish flames reaching into the night. But it was too late. Already, the Courthouse was on fire, and Morgan was seen denouncing his men for letting the fire get out of control.

We worked for the next hour to save what we could, but the fire had already done its work. In the end, the only thing we were able to save with any certainty was our own lives. Father and I stood for a time watching as the fire, having consumed all it could, began to fade away. We then retreated wearily back to our temporary home.

The next day, we learned that Black Triplett and Gabriel Close had been taken prisoner by Morgan's men, and had been executed near the spot where Major Joseph's men had been killed less than two weeks before. Close, who had run into the creek only to flounder in the mud, had been stabbed several times by a soldier wielding a bayonet.

For some time after, whenever Father and I passed by the southwest corner of the Bee Creek Bridge, we were reminded of this tragedy by the letters "U.S." scrawled in the blood of these two.

As for William, he eventually did go South with Si Gordon, and only came home after having his arm amputated. Like father, he eventually settled down and married a year after the war ended. And you know, I suppose Will and I never did figure out who won our little "fight" on Bee Creek all those years ago. But as I stand here now with children of my own, gazing over my Father's place of rest next to my Mother, I pause to listen to the sounds of our children playing in the same Creek we used to, and I think it all turned out as it should.

Note: While the story revolving around the main characters is fiction, the incidents and secondary characters are not, and are as they appear in W.M. Paxton's Annals of Platte County – a record of the County from its exploration, down to June 1, 1897.