

# The Wilson Massacre

## *The Story of Union Brutality in the Southeast Missouri Ozarks*

Second edition

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By: [Clint E. Lacy](#)

One of the most controversial pieces of work that late author and historian Jerry Ponder wrote was his account of the Wilson Massacre in Ripley County, Missouri; which occurred on December 25th 1863. On December 23rd, 1863, members of the 15th Missouri Cavalry, CSA, attacked and captured nearly 100 Union prisoners at Centerville in Reynolds County, Missouri; burning the courthouse down before they left. Ponder wrote that:

"An unusual group assembled at the Pulliam farm in southwestern Ripley County, Missouri for Christmas in 1863. Nearly 150 officers and men of the Missouri State Guard's 15th Cavalry Regiment (Confederate); at least sixty civilians, many of them women and children; and 102 prisoners, officers and men of Company C, Missouri State Militia (Union).

The civilians were family members, friends, and neighbors. Confederate "hosts" and Union "guests" were all Missourians; but they were divided by perhaps the bitterest of all enmities--those of civil war.

The day's activity was to begin with religious services conducted by the Reverend Colonel Timothy Reeves, commanding officer of the 15th Cavalry and a Baptist preacher of Ripley County. Then would follow Christmas dinner in the afternoon. The group at Pulliam's farm numbered above three hundred at the very least, if the figures on the record are to be believed. It was too many for a mere religious service and holiday dinner. Pulliam's was one of Reeves's regimental camps.

What began as a festive occasion ended in horror and tragedy. As the celebrants sat at dinner, their arms stacked, they were surprised by two companies of the Union Missouri State Militia, more than 200 mounted cavalymen. Only those guarding the prisoners, about 35 men, were armed. The Militia attacked without warning, shooting into the crowd, attacking with sabers, and killing at least thirty of the Confederate men instantly and mortally wounding several more. According to local tradition, many--perhaps most--of the civilians were killed or wounded as well.

The immediate cause of the Wilson Massacre was a series of events at Centerville, Reynolds County. Centerville Courthouse was some sixty miles north of Doniphan and twenty-five southwest of Pilot Knob. Late in 1863, Centerville was captured by the Union 3rd Cavalry from Pilot Knob. Company C was left as garrison. On December 21,

while engaged in building stables on the courthouse grounds, they were surprised and surrounded by Company N of Reeves's 15th Missouri Cavalry, under command of Captain Jesse Pratt, before the war the Baptist minister of Centerville. Company N was composed of farmers and merchants of Reynolds County. Probably Pratt and the Reeves brothers, also Baptist preachers, were long-time acquaintances. That Pratt was accorded the honor of recapturing his hometown was not accidental.

Captured were 102 Union men with their horses. Pratt took them south to Ripley County with a small group, leaving most of his men to garrison Centerville. He presented the prisoners to Reeves at Pulliam's on Christmas morning, and joined his fellows of the regiment for the day's festivities. One Union soldier had been allowed to escape at Centerville, doubtless to carry news of the event back to Pilot Knob. Reaction there was swift. Colonel R.G. Woodson, commander of the 3rd Missouri, ordered two mounted cavalry companies under Major James Wilson to pursue Pratt. They left Pilot Knob mid-morning on the twenty-third.

Wilson's force rode swiftly, rising in the darkness of the twenty-fifth to be on the road at 3:00 AM. They passed through Doniphan that morning, and continued west toward Ponder, capturing pickets as they went, and descended on Colonel Reeve's group and prisoners just as they were eating Christmas dinner" (1)

Mr. Ponder's research on this subject can be found in his book: "History of Ripley County Missouri" , "A History of the 15th Missouri Cavalry Regiment, CSA: 1862-1865" , in an article published in Ozark Watch magazine (Vol.IV, No.4, Spring 1991) entitled, "Between Missourians: The Civil War in Ripley County", as well as "The Civil War in Ripley County Missouri" (published by the Doniphan-Prospect News in 1992) His research was also convincing enough that author Paulette Jiles used it in her novel "Enemy Women".

It was during this time, that the controversy arose concerning Ponder's research. Most of the criticism appears to have come from Ripley County Historian Ray Burson.

Mr. Burson contacted me several times and tried to convince me not to believe Mr. Ponder. He even sent me a packet of info that he has created to dissuade those who dare use Ponder's research in their writings. Among the papers that Mr. Burson included in his "packet" were pieces (that he put together) entitled: "Jerry Ponder's Sources for the Wilson Massacre and Other Tales" and "Jerry Ponder On Providing His Sources".

Mr. Burson has also seemingly convinced historian and author Kirby Ross that Ponder's account of the Wilson Massacre is fictitious. However, Ponder, shortly before his death in 2005 sent me two documents,

The two papers are:

“The Time of the War" By: Lindzy Dudley written in 1918. Dudley appears to have fought under Colonel Reeves. His name does not appear on the official records, however

this is not uncommon. Many men "took to the brush" in order to defend their families from Yankee invasion. It is also my understanding that Confederate "Partisans" were not afforded the same pensions later in life as Union and regular Confederate troops were, therefore no pension records would exist to verify their service. In this piece Lindzy Dudley states (of the Wilson Massacre):

“Reeves was a Baptist preacher. He backed up every sermon with his pistol. Reeves men were mean. No quarter was given or asked. He had commanded a company till the end of 1863.

Colonel Righter was captured with General Thompson and Reeves was put in command of the 15th. In November a field hospital was attacked by colored cavalry and about 100 of Reeves' men were killed. Reeves collected revenge but he never got over the loss of sick and wounded not able to fight back. Just shot in their beds. He talked about that until he died. On Christmas, a month later, several companies were at the Pulliam farm for a service and feed with their families. This was on the old Tom Pulliam place northwest of Johnston's Chapel and close to Oregon County and the Arkansas line. There was a big spring there on the Mill Branch where folks in that part had picnics. Reeves did a sermon and the group was ready to eat. The well known Major Wilson, the Yankee from Pilot Knob called "The Murderer", surrounded and attacked. The killed and the wounded were all over the field. Soldiers, their families, nearby families. All were killed. Those that could get across the creek and up the bluff on the south side and into the timber there to hide or keep on running. It was not right to kill the families. Wilson lived up to his name. The loss of sick and wounded at the hospital and the loss of the men and families at Pulliams was pretty hard to take. We were ready to wipe out the blues all the way to St. Louis" (2)

It is interesting that Ray Burson of the Ripley County Historical Society, would question Dudley's credibility in his account of the Wilson Massacre, yet in the book "History and Families of Ripley County Missouri" the historical society (who along with the publisher holds the copyright to the book) finds Dudley credible enough to relate who the first European settler of Ripley County was:

*"In an interview with historian HUME in 1900, Lindzy DUDLEY reported that the first European resident was a "Wees RILEY" who arrived in 1802 with a Delaware Indian wife who soon died in childbirth" (3)*

The other document was entitled: "Doniphan- No Man's Land During the Civil War" By: T. L. Wright Jr. and was written in March ,1929. The paper appears to be one written for a High school assignment by T. L. Wright Jr.. On the copy that Mr. Ponder sent me "DONIPHAN PUBLIC LIBRARY" is stamped on the upper left hand corner of the page.

I was able to talk to Jerry Ponder over the phone, while he was in Texas (a few months before he died) and he told me that he found the documents after they had been discarded. During the time that he found the documents (1990-1991) the Doniphan Public Library and the Ripley County library were being consolidated.

In addition I contacted the Ripley County Library's Doniphan Missouri location on Friday July 29, 2006 and talked to two separate librarians, Mr. Allen Rife and Mrs. Rebecca Wilcox. Both told me it was possible that the documents could have been discarded during the consolidation. During a second phone interview conducted on August 7th, 2006 I talked to a third librarian Mrs. Patricia Robison, who told me that though she did not work at the library at the time of the consolidation, she is a life long resident of Ripley County it was "entirely possible" that documents were discarded during the consolidation of the two libraries in the early 1990's.

As a side note, I was also able to check out a book from the Doniphan-Ripley County Library entitled "Doniphan and Ripley County History". There is no copyright date, but the earliest entries appear to be from the early 1900's and the last entry appears to be in the early 1970's and upon examination of the library stamp on this book, and the documents that Jerry Ponder sent me, they are the same and one can clearly ascertain that the library stamp on the documents Jerry Ponder sent me is valid.

T. L. Wright Jr.'s 1929 paper also gives long time residents accounts of the Wilson Massacre. Given the fact that this paper was written in 1929, it is possible that the accounts could have been eyewitness accounts. Certainly they could be accounts written by citizens who were living during the time of the "Wilson Massacre".

"On Christmas Day, 1863, Major James Wilson, later captured and executed by firing squad at Pilot Knob, and 200 Union troops from Fort Davidson at Pilot Knob, passed through Doniphan, traveling on a southeast course to Pulliam's Farm, 17 miles from Doniphan where Colonel Reeves and his cavalry were encamped. A vicious, surprise attack ensued and 35 rebels were killed and 112 taken prisoner when the fighting had ended. But worse, families and neighbors were present and, in the heat of battle, Wilson's soldiers killed over 50 civilians. Mrs. Betty Towell, Tom Pulliam and Ed Cline, long-time residents of the neighborhood, tell that the civilians killed, in camp for a Christmas visit, included women and children who were shot down the same as the rebel soldiers of Reeves' Regiment. That action attests to the cruelty of the war." (4)

According to historian Kirby Ross, T.L. Wright Jr. was born in 1912. That would have made T.L. Wright Jr. 17 years of age at the time he wrote this document (which appears to be a high school paper). One of the criticisms that Mr. Ross has made in his attempt to discredit Jerry Ponder was posted on an online forum on August 14th, 2005. In it Mr. Ross states (in reference to the document written by T.L. Wright Jr. in 1929) that:

"...do you realize that this version of the T.L. Wright article has a four year old boy conducting complex historical interviews?" (5)

Ross continues by stating:

"Now as to Mr. Ponder's fantabulous precocious four year old interviewer/historian, T. L. Wright, I refer you to Mr. Lacy's posting that says:

"A major set-back was experienced by the Confederate Army on August 24, 1863, when General Jeff Thompson, Colonel William Righter and most of their staffs were captured at the hotel in Pocahontas while holding a planning meeting. General Thompson was taken to a military prison in Ohio and held there for over a year before he was released. Colonel Righter was taken to St. Louis by a circuitous route around Ripley County. He agreed to sign an alliance to the Union and put up \$1,000.00 bond as assurance that he would not fight again. The Colonel told me."

That last sentence bears repeating: "The Colonel told me."

Ponder is offering this to show that T.L. Wright personally interviewed Col. William H. Righter. This passage is so ridiculously bad that it is laugh out loud funny and begs to be repeated, for you see, T.L. Wright was born Feb. 15, 1912 and William Harmon Righter passed away on November 26, 1916." (6)

This criticism by Ross bears examination. First of all, as stated before, T.L. Wright Jr. was 17 years of age when he wrote his 1st version of "Doniphan: No Man's Land in the Civil War" in 1929 and the words "The Colonel told me" seems to be more of a recollection of a story that William Harmon Righter told him when he was a young boy. Nowhere has Jerry Ponder ever written that T.L. Wright Jr. was conducting "complex interviews" at 4 years of age. It is also important to note that T. L. Wright Jr.'s 1929 version of "Doniphan: No Man's Land During the Civil War", matches Lindzy Dudley's 1918 version of what occurred at Pulliam's Farm on December 25, 1863.

On the same online forum posted by Kirby Ross on Wednesday August 31st, 2005, Ross states:

"And with this published account of the document in question, if Jerry Ponder's version of "the Wilson Massacre" is to be accepted, one must also accept that Wright participated in part of the massive cover-up of the massacre that Jo Shelby and Jeff Thompson would have also been a part of." (7)

There is no way that Confederate General M. Jeff Thompson of the Missouri State guard could be involved in the Wilson Massacre because he was captured on August 22, 1863. The Wilson Massacre occurred on December 25, 1863. General M. Jeff Thompson was in a Yankee prison in the North at the time that the "Wilson Massacre" occurred. (7)

It is possible that after General Thompson's release in 1864, that he had no doubt heard about the atrocities being committed in Ripley County and the surrounding areas, after he made his way back to Missouri just in time to participate in General Price's 1864 Missouri Expedition.

On the same August 31st, 2005 online forum post Kirby Ross offers another version of T.L. Wright Jr.'s "Doniphan: No Man's Land in the Civil War" which he claims is the "real" T.L. Wright Jr. document and was published in Doniphan Prospect-News Doniphan, Missouri Thursday, April 2, 1970. Ross states:

"By the way, note that Wright doesn't refer to William H. Righter as being one of his sources in this article, or of having interviewed him when he was four years old." (8)

This is true, T.L. Wright Jr. does not make mention of Colonel William H. Righter as one of his sources in the 1970 Prospect-News newspaper article. However one must remember that there is a 31 year difference between the article written in 1970, when T.L. Wright Jr. was 58 years of age and the one written in 1929 when he was 17 years of age. Mr. Ross claims that the 1970 Doniphan Prospect News article is the "real" T.L. Wright Jr. article. Yet there is a third version of the T.L. Wright Jr. article that appeared in the Ripley County Library book, "Doniphan and Ripley County in the Civil War", there is no date on this piece, but it appears to be written around the same time period as the 1970 article. Like the 1970 article there is no mention of civilians killed or Colonel Righter. But there are areas in which the T.L. Wright Jr. article found in the book "Doniphan and Ripley County in the Civil War" differ from the version published in the Doniphan - Prospect news in 1970. Is it not legitimate as well?

It appears that in later years T.L. Wright Jr. decided to cite more official sources for his revised work, "Doniphan: No Man's Land in the Civil War" and his version of the Wilson Massacre seems to follow other versions in the "Doniphan and Ripley County in the Civil War" book found in the Ripley County Library. This does not make his original version any less valid. Remember the 1929 version quoted long time residents of Ripley County who lived in the area.

No one knows why T.L. Wright Jr chose not to include these sources in the two other versions of his paper in later years.

Mr. Burson's criticism seems to be centered around Colonel William H. Righter himself and whether or not he was a real Colonel. In a personal letter sent to me by Ray Burson entitled: "Jerry Ponder's Sources for the Wilson Massacre and other Tales" Burson writes:

"The tale: That William Harmon Righter was the founder and Colonel of the 15th Missouri Cavalry, CSA, captured at Pocahontas, AR with Gen. Jeff Thompson and then sat out the rest of the war in St. Louis. Righter is a prominent figure in Ponder's books on the 15th Missouri Cavalry, The Battle of Chalk Bluff and Maj. Gen. John S. Marmaduke.

Historians have not found any record of Righter's service in the CSA and there is not mention of it in his biographic sketches and three obituaries. He is not mentioned in the OR with the Capture of Thompson or elsewhere. He was merely a Southern sympathizer. Ponder got the VA {Veterans Administration} to provide a headstone which he had placed in the Doniphan City cemetery for Righter without providing Righter's service record" (9)

A "Post It" note was attached to the letter which reads:

"Mr. Lacy, Here's the real scope of Ponder's mischief. See IV- what does creating fake colonels add to the story of Southern valor during the Civil War? Regards, Ray Burson"

The fact that Burson has stated that no service record of Righter in the CSA has been found doesn't mean that Righter did not serve in some capacity. As stated at the beginning of this article, this was not uncommon, many men "took to the brush" and fought as informal companies of partisans. It is extremely doubtful that the Veterans Administration would have provide a headstone for Colonel Righter, free of charge, without some kind of documentation that Righter served in some capacity during the war.

In Jean Ponder's story "Doniphan During the Civil War", she states that:

"There is an amusing anecdote told about a group of southern sympathizers who lived in Doniphan. Living in the town at that time was a man by the name of W.H. Ryder, who claimed he was from Virginia. -- 'A gentleman from Virginia - drunk or sober.' One day all of these southern sympathizers were gathered in the town. Suddenly, without any warning, a division of the Union Army marched into town. Caught unprepared, the Southerns had to 'take to the bushes' for their lives. As Ryder was the fastest runner of them all and got to safety first, the rest of them immediately made him their colonel." (10)

If these men were ordinary citizens, then why were they afraid, why did they run? If they were nothing more than ordinary citizens, then why were they gathered in town? What was the intention of the gathering?

Is it possible that Righter and his companions were more than "Southern sympathizers"? The March 1862 Continental Monthly states that:

"In conversing lately with Dr. B., who fled for his life, last July, from Ripley County, Southern Missouri, I collected some information which may not be unacceptable to your readers. Dr. B. states that early last summer the citizens of Southern Missouri began gathering into companies of armed men opposed to the general government, and that it was a fear that the general government would not protect their lives and property"(11)

The fact that obituaries about Righter did not mention any military service is not proof positive that he did not fight. After all Colonel Timothy Reeves, after the war, was reluctant to discuss his war time experiences, stating that "he wished to be remembered as a good preacher, not a civil war hero", obituaries about him made no mention of his military experience. (12)

Jerry Ponder said in his research that Righter's commission came from Brigadier General M. Jeff Thompson. Ponder's critics state that Thompson made no record of this. Is it possible that this could have happened? It is entirely possible. In his book "This is the War Experiences of Brigadier General M. Jeff Thompson", Thompson himself writes that:

"About the 1st of July 1861, Cyrus Black and Miles Ponder of Ripley County, Missouri came down to Pocohontas {Arkansas} to inform me that the citizens of Ripley and Carter

counties were meeting at Martins-burg to organize a Battalion and desired me to come up and take command" (13)

Thompson further states that he was elected to command the battalion and that Aden Lowe was not a candidate because of the strict discipline that he enforced before Thompson's arrival. One of Jeff Thompson's first acts as commander of the Ripley County Battalion, was to, start enlisting men as Partisan rangers. Thompson writes:

"I saw at this time the necessity of mounted troops even for my small command, and I authorized James F. White to raise as many men to act as Partizans and Flankers , as he could find with good horses: (14)

Sam Hildebrand, who later became known as a Missouri Bushwhacker, is another partisan that was given a commission by General M. Jeff Thompson. In his autobiography Hildebrand wrote:

"As soon as I could gain admission to the General's headquarters I did so, and he received me very kindly. He listened very attentively to me as I proceeded to state my case to him - how my brother had been murdered, how I had barely escaped the same fate, and how I had finally been driven from the country.

General THOMPSON reflected a few moments, then seizing a pen he rapidly wrote off a few lines and handing it to me he said, "here, I give you a Major's commission; go where you please, take what men you can pick up, fight on your own hook, and report to me every six months." (15)

Even though Hildebrand received a Major's commission from Thompson, the act is not mentioned in "This is the War Experiences of Brigadier General M. Jeff Thompson". Nor is it mentioned in "General M. Jeff Thompson's Letter Book July 1861-June 1862", written by Jim McGhee, therefore the fact that there is no record of Righter's commission, doesn't mean that he was not given one by Thompson.

Yet there is another possibility in this story. If there was a record of Colonel Righter's or Sam Hildebrand's commissions given by M. Jeff Thompson, the records might have very well been destroyed at the time of M. Jeff Thompson's capture in Pocahontas, Arkansas, on August 22, 1863. In the book, "This is the War Experiences of Brigadier General M. Jeff Thompson", Thompson writes:

"Kay spread out my maps to examine them and by -the -way I had the best set of maps that I saw during the war, for I had all kinds of military information on them, and the name and status of nearly every man in Southeast Missouri. I sat down in my shirt sleeves to copy some drawings, about 4 P.M. We heard horses running. I did not look up, but Kay did and shouted ; "By George , here's the Feds." I sprang to my feet, and sure enough they were within forty yards, with a string of them as far as the eye could reach, all coming at full speed. I gasped as if my heart would jump out of my mouth, but instantly sat down again, and said:, Kay, burn those maps." (16)

The only flaw in the Linzy Dudley, T.L Wright Jr.'s 1929 document, and Ponder's writings that I could find is the fact that Righter was not captured directly with Thompson. Again quoting "This is the War Experiences of Brigadier General M. Jeff Thompson" Thompson writes of being brought to Doniphan , Missouri in route to Pilot Knob, Missouri that:

"There were only five military prisoners, being Kay, Train, McDonald , Miller and myself, but there were a large number of people , men and boys, brought into camp to prevent them from carrying the news". (17)

Righter could have very well have been in the latter group. Perhaps this is the reason that Lindzy Dudley told Charles Booker in 1918 that:

"Colonel Righter was captured with General Thompson" (18)

In the book "The Civil War in Ripley County , Missouri" it states that Colonel W.H. Righter following his capture was:

"...was taken to Gratiot Prison in St. Louis. There he agreed not to further take up arms and was paroled. He remained in St. Louis the remainder of the war, reading law. His wife, Anna Wright Righter, died there in February 1864. When the war ended, Colonel Righter returned to Ripley County and, in 1866, was elected as the state representative from Ripley County. Because of his Confederate service, the General Assembly refused to seat him and appointed a "stand -in" to represent the county...In 1867 Colonel Righter went to Mississippi and raised cotton, but he returned to Ripley County the same year and built the Bay City Mills on Current River" and that, "As soon as the Missouri constitution permitted former Confederates to practice law in the state Righter leased the mills and opened a law office in Doniphan. He was considered an excellent lawyer and had a large practice. He was elected prosecuting attorney for Ripley County in 1876" (19)

The Thursday Sept. 2d, 1909 issue of "Twice a Month Magazine" confirms that Righter:

"returned to St. Louis October 1863, planted cotton in Mississippi in 1866-67 and returned to Ripley County in 1868" (20)

"Twice a Month Magazine" also stated that :

"Colonel Righter is a typical Southern gentleman possessing nearly all their strongest characteristics. During the Reconstruction days of the late 60's and early 70's he had many "warm skirmishes" with the "carpet baggers" his county contained about 300 Democratic voters who were "slow to come under the ban". Leaving it in the hands of about 12 Republicans to handle its affairs". (21)

Righter was elected to the State Legislature in 1882, after Reconstruction, when former Confederates were once again allowed to hold office. (22)

Even without the discussion of what role Colonel William Harmon Righter played in the War Between the States, there is plenty of other evidence that proves the "Wilson Massacre" could have happened. Yankee atrocities happened throughout the Missouri Ozarks during the war and fighting between warring factions was both personal and brutal.

Jerry Ponder stated that he believed Capt. Jesse Pratt's capture of 102 Union prisoners at Centerville, Missouri on December 21, 2009 set off a series of events that led to the "Wilson Massacre". It is my belief that the capture of the federals at Centerville, Missouri was a "pre-emptive strike" to prevent further atrocities in the area.

While reading the J.S. Marmaduke correspondence (housed in the National archives) I found a dispatch written by Captain Timothy Reeves on August 27, 1863. One gets the impression that Reeves and his men were being held in reserve while atrocities were being committed in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri. From Reeves:

"Col

I just received horrible news from ??? by way of my scout viz Dr Bledsoe who has just returned from there after seeing his house committed to the flames on Friday last by the inhuman hands of the Enemy. They also said that his was the thirteenth (13) house they burned that day & they barbarously fell on one man by the name of ??? & shot him five times. They also said that he was the eighth citizen they had murdered that day. This ??? was done by a scout of about four hundred in the vicinity of Poplar Bluff they came through from Bloomfield by way of Ash Hill & the last account we have from them, they were at the Blue ???, they also had two pieces of small artillery which they fire from ??? on their arrival at that place. Their number supposed to be about four hundred (400) & is it a fact that such a party as this shall be allowed to run over ruin and devastate the whole of north east Ark and south Missouri when there is hundreds of men lying idle around & armed & ready to rescue their country at all hazards, but instead of this he compelled to stay fifty or an hundred miles from where they might be of use to keep the Federals in check & from ??? and ??? our free salt with their feet resting upon the necks of our old father women & children, ??? say not never." (23)

Reeves is begging his superiors to unleash he and his men to put a stop to the atrocities and directly cites the plight of men, women and yes ... children. There is no way of knowing for sure the exact thoughts running through Captain Reeves mind during this time but the term "frustration" comes to mind. Think about it, a Confederate Captain and his men being held 100 miles in reserve for an attack that is not coming yet having to live with the fact that the friends, family members and citizens in the area suffering from Federals who are , and I will cite the dispatch again, I want this to sink in...

The Federals who are resting "**Their feet ... upon the necks of our old father, women and children**" Folks there is another term for this and it is living "under the heal". What this means is that no one, I repeat no one made a move without the Federal army knowing about it. No one feeds family members (who happen to be fighting for the Confederacy without the Federals knowing about it. It means what you have really doesn't belong to

you anymore, it belongs to them and it doesn't end in August 1863, it continues through November as well.

A U.S. Forestry Service website entitled, "History of the Irish Wilderness", provides a detailed description of Union policy toward Missouri Southerners living in the Southeast Missouri Ozarks.

The website cites the War of the Rebellions: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, one entry in particular shows proof that the women of the area were looked down upon and treated badly by the occupying Union soldiers. Captain Robert McElroy of the 3rd Missouri State Militia (Union) wrote that:

"I am of the opinion that the women in that region are even more daring and treacherous, and in fact, worse than the men, as we found in their possession a number of newly made rebel uniforms, etc. (24)

Jerry Ponder's critics cite eye-witness accounts of Union soldiers who were present at the Wilson Massacre and stated that all of the prisoners were well cared for. But reading through the U.S. Forestry Service's "The History of the Irish Wilderness", which cites the official records of the War of the Rebellions, one will find that anyone who was even "suspected" of being a "Bushwhacker" was taken prisoner. In Captain Boyd's (who was a Union Scout) report he states that:

"...found fresh trail of horses, followed them on Jack's Fork to the residence of Miles Stephens and brother, Jack Stephens, whom' I'm satisfied were Bushwhackers. Burned the house." (25)

Anyone "suspected" of harboring or aiding a Bushwhacker had their property burned, furthermore, in Captain John Boyd's report of the 6th Provisional Regiment EMM (Union) one will find between November 4 - 9, 1863, there were over 23 houses burned, and 10 men killed, by these Union troops, the majority of which were prisoners who "tried to escape" and were shot. (26)

All of this occurred little over a month before the "Wilson Massacre" and we are supposed to believe that the Union militia treated Reeves men and local civilians any better on December 25, 1863?

Yet there is even more evidence of Union atrocities in the Southeast Missouri Ozarks, that would convince even the hardest skeptics that the Union army, specifically the militia was fully capable of carrying out what we would label in modern terminology as "ethnic cleansing". One has to look no farther than the Patterson Family History, a genealogical paper written by Gene Braschler.

In it Mr. Braschler writes that Daniel Pitchford Patterson left Ripley County, Missouri on August 13, 1862 with Colonel James D. White. He was trained at Yellville, Arkansas

and was elected 2nd Lt. of Company H.(9<sup>th</sup> Missouri Volunteers) He saw battle at Prairie Grove , Arkansas, and was promoted to Captain before the Battle of Helena, Ark.

“On December 6,1863 Captain Patterson was ordered by Brigadier General M.M. Parsons to recruit duty along the Missouri / Arkansas border. The Special Order #215 also sent other officers back to this vicinity” Now listen closely to this part... “Captain Epps was ordered via the same S. O and was captured at the Christmas Day massacre in S. W. Ripley County”..(27)

The Wilson Massacre, by the way, is also know as, the Christmas Day Massacre but this is not the end of the story in regards to Yankee “ethnic cleansing” in the Southeast Missouri Ozarks, it was especially unfortunate for Captain Patterson.

Prior to General Price’s attempt to take back Missouri in September 1864 Patterson became commander of Company B, 15<sup>th</sup>, Missouri Cavalry and thus reported directly to...Colonel Timothy Reeves which might explain what I am about to tell you. (28)

Still quoting from Braschler’s “Patterson Family History”:

“There was another little known cruel aspect of the war by which Captain Patterson and his family were made to suffer. This was the economic and food source embargo placed upon members of {Confederate} officers families by the U.S. Army. This was particularly effective in parts of Arkansas where much of the food production was under the control of that {the U.S.} army. During the war he lost two children {sons} from malnutrition / maltreatment. Two daughters survived but were severely affected. His wife survived only to die from childbirth after the war”, this Braschler writes, “was probably due to mainly the lack of food and hardship suffered during the war.” (29)

In another war, during another time later in history there is only one word that describes this type of policy towards civilians and that word is “holocaust”. If the Union Army had no problem starving women and children to a slow agonizing death, then I certainly have no problems believing that the same Union army would have no problem granting them a quick death by the use of a gun.

There are other pieces of evidence that suggest that the "Wilson Massacre" did happen. At the Stoddard County Civil War Cemetery in Bloomfield, Missouri, there are monuments erected in honor of Southern soldiers and civilians who were killed during the War Between the States. The monuments are unique due to the fact that they have detailed information about the individual on the front of the monument, name, rank unit, etc. and on the back of the monument a detailed description of where and how the individual died.

One states on the front of the monument: *"PVT. , Thomas McKinney, Co. A, 15th Mo. Reg. Cav. CSA. July 16, 1845 - Dec. 25, 1863."* The back of the monument reads: *"Killed in Action, Ripley County, Mo"*.

Another monument is more specific. The front reads: *"In memory of, PVT. , Jacob Foster, Co. A, 15th Mo. Cav. , April 18, 1830- December 25, 1863."*

The back of the monument reads: *"Died of Wounds, Received At, Christmas Dinner, Doniphan Mo., "Wilson Massacre" (30)*

If one looks at the events following the "Wilson Massacre" a clear picture begins to develop that something "very significant" happened on December 25, 1863 in Ripley County , Missouri. An event so drastic, that the effects of it would be felt throughout the rest of the War Between the States in Missouri, and even after the war had ended.

First of all something must have been weighing very heavily upon Major Wilson's mind for in March of 1864 he told his nephew, while he was on furlough:

"If you ever hear of me being taken prisoner by the guerilla Tim Reeves you may count me as dead. I know I shall never get away from him alive. I have broken up his recruiting operations three times." (31)

Was Wilson worried about his life because he had broken up Reeves' recruiting operations? Or did he fear retribution for something much worse, that he did not want his family to know about?

One must not discount the fact that that during the General Sterling Price's Missouri Expedition of 1864, at the Battle of Pilot Knob, Missouri:

"Maj. James Wilson, Third Cavalry Missouri State Militia, after being wounded was captured on Pilot Knob, and subsequently with six of his gallant men was brutally murdered by order of a rebel field officer of the day." (32)

In an article entitled: "No Heroes On Either Side" written by Ponder critic Ray Burson and published in the Prospect-News (Doniphan Missouri's local newspaper) and dated Wednesday, July 16,2003 , another Ponder critic Kirby Ross attributes Major Wilson's death to the burning of Doniphan, Missouri.

"Ross , whose article on the burning of Doniphan will be in an upcoming issue of North - South magazine, linked Wilson's death to the destruction of Doniphan "which had taken place earlier, two weeks to the day." (33)

However, in the *"Report of Confederate General J.O. Shelby C. S. Army, Commanding Division. AUGUST 29-DECEMBER 2, 1864. Price's Missouri Expedition."*

It appears that General Shelby administered justice to the perpetrators who were responsible for the of burning Doniphan, almost as quickly as the act was committed. Shelby wrote that:

"On the 12th of September I moved camp from Sulphur Rock, Ark., toward Pocahontas in anticipation of the arrival of the army, and on the 19th, after having received my instructions, started for Missouri, and encamped in Doniphan. Before arriving there, however, couriers from Lieutenant-Colonel Johnson, of Marmaduke's command, brought information that 100 Federals were in the town and pressing him back. I immediately started forward sufficient re-enforcements, but the enemy fled before reaching them, burning the helpless and ill-fated town. That night I dispatched 150 men under Lieutenant-Colonel Johnson to pursue the vandals. They came upon them early the next morning [20th], attacked, scattered, and killed many of them. I pushed on then rapidly for Patterson, destroying on the way the bloody rendezvous of the notorious Leeper, and on the morning of the 22d I surrounded and charged in upon the town. Its garrison, hearing of my advance, retreated hastily, but not before many were captured and killed, and some supplies taken. All the Government portion of Patterson was destroyed, together with its strong and ugly fort." (34)

Confederate General M. Jeff Thompson offered another reason for the execution of Major James Wilson. As mentioned earlier in this article, Thompson was in a Union prison at the time of the "Wilson Massacre", but he was exchanged in time to make his way back to Missouri to join Confederate General Sterling Price's 1864 Missouri Expedition.

In May of 1865 Thompson surrendered 10,000 men at Jacksonport, Arkansas. Out of those 10,000 men, only one was not paroled. Confederate Colonel, Timothy Reeves, Commander of the 15th Missouri Cavalry, CSA. Thompson wrote that:

" In a few days we finished all the paroles, except that of Timothy C. Reeves, whom Col. Davis would not agree to parole, considering him outlawed for the shooting of Major Williams { Major Wilson, this was a misprint} and five men on the Price Raid; but I must state for Col. Reeves, that he was as good a man and soldier as any in the command, and his shooting of that party was entirely justifiable; only that it should have been by such an order and form that retaliation would have been avoided.

I solicited to have this party turned over to me, that I might have them shot in due form, and Reeves men refrained from killing them for three days in hopes that I would get them; but responsibilities of this kind were not to our commanders liking, and they were turned over to Reeves to guard, with a pretty full knowledge that they would be shot.

I knew Reeves men, nearly everyone of them, and the provocation was bitter, for I had seen the blackened ruins and lonely graves in Ripley county with my own eyes." (35)

Is it possible that Jerry Ponder made some mistakes in his research? Yes. Everyone makes mistakes. But Jerry Ponder was a retired military intelligence officer, and far from inept.

Is it possible that his two greatest critics Ray Burson and Kirby Ross are biased in their research?

In an online webpage entitled, "The Military Record of Major James Wilson", author Willard S. Bacon writes that:

"Mr. Kirby Ross who had many relatives who served in the 3rd MSM, provided immeasurable help, in finding obscure sources and documents, from many repositories."  
(36)

(Major Wilson, was the commander of the 3rd Missouri State Militia, which attacked Pulliam's Farm on December 25, 1863)

Friends of Jerry Ponder have also told me that Ray Burson, was not originally from Ripley County, Missouri, but from a Northern state, and that it is rumored his wife is a descendant of one of the 14 families in Ripley, County Missouri that were pro-Union during the war. I have attempted to contact Burson in the hopes that he could shed some light on this subject. But as of yet he has not provided any answers to this question.

However his niece, Peggy Brooks Cannady sent me an email on Jan. 11, 2009 that stated:

“My mother was the great-niece of Mahala Bellah Pulliam, wife of Barney Pulliam, brother of Thomas Pulliam. Barney & Mahala are buried down the road at Johnston’s Chapel Cemetery (this cemetery is mentioned in your article.)

My father was the great-grandson of Dr. William Atherton Brooks, Pvt, Co A, 47<sup>th</sup> Missouri Infantry (Union), who lived in Pleasant Grove, Ripley County, Missouri. My father’s first cousin, Grace Estes Burlison, was the mother of Ruth Burson, wife of Ray Burson. So, yes, his wife Ruth is descended from one of the 14 families that were Union sympathizers in Ripley County. I do have a transcription of my gg-grandfather’s journal, up to and including the war, and there were definitely atrocities in Ripley County ON BOTH SIDES.

Peggy Brooks Cannady” (37)

In closing I would like to say that many of Jerry Ponder’s detractors use an official War of the Rebellion report to claim that “The Wilson Massacre” was nothing more than a “rescue mission”. The report dated December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1863 from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Missouri State Militia Headquarters in Pilot Knob Missouri, and written by Major James Wilson states:

“SIR : In compliance with your orders of the 23d instant, I left Pilot Knob, in command of 200 men, about 10 a. m. December 23,1863, arriving at Patterson at 9 p. m. Left there at daylight on the 24th, and encamped at Long's at 9 p. m., having traveled 35 miles. Marched again at 3 a. m. 25th instant; passed through Doniphau, taking a southwesterly direction toward the Arkansas liue. Eight miles from Doniphau,

1 captured 2 pickets; 2 miles farther I captured one other post, and still

2 miles farther on came upon a rolling picket or patrol, and run them off of the road, capturing 1 and compelling him to lead us to the camp of Reves.\* Arriving at the camp, I divided my men into two columns, and charged upon them with my whole force. The enemy fired, turned, and threw down their arms and fled, with the exception of 30 or 35, and they were riddled with bullets or pierced through with the saber almost instantly. The enemy lost in killed about 30; wounded mortally, 3; slightly, 2; total killed and wounded, 35. Prisoners captured, 112; horses, besides those of Company 0, 75; also all their arms, ammunition, and camp equipage. Not having means of transportation, I was compelled to destroy the bigger portion of the arms and all the tents and other camp equipage.

On the morning of the 26th, I started for Pilot Knob, arriving here about 4 p. m. on the 29th of December, 1863.

I cannot speak in too high terms of praise of the officers and men under my command. There was no loss on our side in killed or wounded.

*James Wilson, Commanding Third Missouri State Militia, Col. R.G. Woodson,”(38)*

I want you to know that I did stumble across one news archive this week that I have **never** seen any of Mr. Ponder’s critics cite. It comes from the December 22, 1863 Chicago Tribune and it states quote:

“From St. Louis...Eighty prisoners from Little Rock arrived this morning. A report has been received at headquarters that the rebel conscripting officers have reappeared at Doniphan, in Southeast Missouri. Col. Livingston’s cavalry command in that vicinity will stir them up. Guerilla Lieutenants and Captains are to be hunted, and when resistance is offered, killed”.(39)

Folks what this amounts to is an extermination order that was issued 3 days before the “Wilson Massacre was committed. This was not a rescue mission on the part of Wilson. It was a convenient excuse for Wilson to carry it out.

We will never know all of the answers and perhaps Mr. Ponder said it best when he wrote that: *"Some questions will probably never be satisfactorily explained"* (40)

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For more information about the basis for Reconstruction and the continued reign of terror in Missouri see: [Iron Clad Oath](#)

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