

Sam Hildebrand, Avenger.

An elderly man from St. Francois county in southeast Missouri, being told while in St. Louis last week that Frank James, the noted ex bandit, is now a respected citizen of St. Louis, remarked that in his opinion Frank and Jesse James and the Younger boys would have settled down to respectable citizenship immediately after the Civil War if they had not been hounded into outlawry.

"They were no worse than thousands of others who fought during the war on the Missouri border," said he, "yet the others were permitted to return home and take up legitimate business pursuits just as though they had never stood up to shoot and be shot at. The Jameses and the Youngers were rebel soldiers, and so was I. They could shoot straighter than I could, and they had more nerve—courage is the word, so their bullets did more execution than mine, and they got posted as outlaws; while I, being only a common plug soldier, was allowed to go home and put in my crops. They had to take to the woods and hustle for their living—rob trains and banks—until finally Jesse got keeled over and Frank surrendered and came off clear.

"I know something about the difficulty of a man settling down after the Civil War when he made a record for killing folks, which I take to be the object of fighting. We had a man down in our country who suffered like the Jameses, but he never turned into a bandit. I guess you all have heard of Sam Hildebrand. He was mustered out much the same way as Jesse James was, and several years before, a fellow stabbed him in the back to get the reward offered for him, dead or alive, that was the only way to get Sam. Lots of other fellows tried to catch him alive, and they didn't have time to be sorry for it. They were added to Sam's private cemetery, which I reckon is just about as populous as that of any bad man who ever lived; and it's no joke, either, for Sam Hildebrand is known to have killed a hundred men during the Civil War, and most of them were his personal enemies. Still, they were all on the other side of the war fence, and I don't see how you can call it murder any more than the killing of men at Gettysburg was murder. Mind, now, I'm not trying to justify all that Sam Hildebrand did; but those were ticklish times, and down in my country it was every man for himself, and if you didn't look out for yourself I reckon you didn't have much show to die of old age.

"There was just as much hot fighting in southeast Missouri and the top part of Arkansas during the war as anything else, though it hasn't got into the histories much to speak of. Our fighting down there was different from what it was up in the north part of the State and on the Kansas border. We've got a broken country, not very well fitted for rough rider business; so there wasn't so much guerrilla warfare among us as there was further north and west, where there is plenty of prairie land and level forest. Down with us it was bushwhacking. You know the difference between the bushwacker and the guerrilla? Well, the guerrilla is mounted, and he travels from twenty to two hundred or more in a gang, he rides into a town before breakfast, hell-to-split, and astonishes the natives so that they forget they've been hungry; he simply shoots up the village a whole lot, takes what he wants from the stores, banks and dwellings, and likewise the pockets of the leading citizens, and then he rides out again hell-to-split over the prairie. And when he rides out there's no leading citizens left alive except those who slid down wells and stayed with the old oaken bucket, or hid in chimneys during the visit. That's the guerrilla style.

"The bushwacker, he's different, I whacked a little bit myself along in the early 60's. If I hadn't done so I wouldn't have been here in St. Louis today enjoying liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I lived in Francois county, and I would have been hung up to a hickory tree on one of those mineral ridges like as not if I hadn't taken to the bushes and looked out for No. 1. The bushwacker as a rule doesn't ride horseback; it's easier walking, for he can lose himself easier on foot than riding. He travels alone or with a squad of from three to thirty or thereabouts and he makes it seem like 3,000 men when it comes to the enemy's camp and begins picking 'em off from the bushes; and they can't find him. Oh, I know it sounds like it was mean to fight that way, but if you had been in the thick

of it you'd have justified yourself same as us.

"Sam Hildebrand, I reckon, was by all odds the most remarkable of the Missouri bushwhackers. He raised the biggest commotion of em all, and the United States and the State of Missouri had more trouble trying to get rid of him than over any other man during war times. In my part of the state, where Sam was born and raised and where he operated mostly, his name has been a household word ever since '65, and for twenty years after the war all you had to do to make a boy behave himself was to tell him that Sam Hildebrand would get him if he didn't watch out. Sam—or rather Sam's memory—was the goblin of that section until long after he was dead and gone for good. The boys even to this day, play a game they call Sam Hildebrand, which consists of getting wooden guns, or sometimes an old pistol or musket and going to the woods to pretend to shoot at one another from ambush; twenty years ago 'playin' Sam Hildebrand' as the name is pronounced with us, was by all odds the most popular game in southeast Missouri. This generation of boys doesn't know so much about him, but we old fellows still talk about his exploits, occasionally, and I often wonder how it is that so little has been written about him in the papers of late years; reckon it was because he didn't graduate into a train robber.

"Oh, yes, I knew Sam; knew him long before the war. I was clerking in the little store at Big River Mills, a village on Big River, near where Hildebrand was born. I used to notice loafing around the store a well-built, swarthy young fellow with black whiskers and one of those old-fashioned long-barrelled rifles which you still see among the Ozark Mountain folks who chew long green tobacco and shoot squirrels. This young fellow was as quiet and peaceable a man as you could wish; I used to think that he was too lazy to do anything more than hunt squirrels and plough corn when hunting wasn't good; didn't look like he had energy enough to do anything else. That's where I was badly mistaken, for that young fellow was Sam Hildebrand, and he developed enough energy in a few years to supply a regiment; he was a whole windmill of energy, and when he once got wound up it took him more than four years to run down. That old rifle he carried when he used to come and sit around the store got famous before the war was over. Sam named it 'Kill-D-evil' because, he said, he had killed so many devils with it. And he had a habit of cutting a little notch in the stock of old Kill Devil every time he killed a man with it. This is no wild West yarn, but an absolute fact, for I have seen the gun; toward the end of the war it had nearly ninety notches cut in the stock.

"If you want to know the story of Sam Hildebrand I may as well begin at the beginning, and everything I say will be verified by almost any man in St. Francois, Washington or Iron county who was old enough to understand the game of war in those times. Sam was a descendant in the seventh generation of Peter Hildebrand of Hanover, youngest son of a German nobleman. His grandfather settled in Missouri in 1770 and was killed by the Indians; his father built the stone farmhouse two or three miles from Big River Mills, in which the bushwacker was born. Sam grew up utterly without education, he didn't know the alphabet from a bill of beans. He was fond of hunting and fishing along Big River. When he was less than 19 years old he married a highly respectable girl of the neighborhood and settled down on a little farm of his own, building a neat log house near the old homestead. He wasn't lazy, either, he went to work, and soon had a comfortable home and was doing well when the war broke out, as a farmer and stock raiser. It was the Hildebrand liking for pork that turned the quiet farmer into a rip roaring bushwacker.

"Sam had several brothers, and together they raised many hogs. In that neighborhood it was the practice to turn the hogs out to feed on the abundant mast in Big River Valley. Many became as wild as deer, and when a farmer wanted some fresh side meat he took his rifle to the woods and shot a porker. All the hogs were branded with the owner's marks. It was charged that sometimes the Hildebrands were too careless about looking for the brand and shot a neighbor's hog. They became known as hog thieves, though they stoutly denied the accusation. In the first

year of the war many hogs were appropriated by men going away to the front. Sam Hildebrand and his brother Frank were accused of stealing a hog. A prominent farmer named Firman McIlvaine became the head of a vigilance committee to hunt down horse thieves. The Hildebrands heard that they were suspected; they took to the woods. After hiding a few days Sam came home after something to eat. He had hardly sat down to the table when he heard a noise outside. Grabbing his gun in one hand and a pone of corn bread in the other he made for the woods, for upon opening the door he saw that his house was surrounded by the vigilance committee. Many shots were fired at him, but he was not hit. He returned home that night, took his wife and their five small children to a place called Flat Woods and left his home till the war was over. Sam was then 25 years old.

"Hildebrand always declared that he was driven to be an outlaw. He knew nothing of the merits of Unionism or Secession. He had claimed to be a Union sympathizer and wanted to stay at home and let the war fight itself. But his brother Frank, who soon got tired of hiding out, came in and surrendered to the vigilantes, who took him back to the woods and hanged him to a tree.

"A little later the members of the vigilance committee organized into a company of Federal home guards. Sam then joined the Southern Confederacy, as he said, for self protection. But he soon had a stronger motive—the desire for revenge. His brother Washington Hildebrand, and a friend of the family were prospecting for lead at a place a few miles from the home stead, now known as the famous St. Joe lead mines at Bonne Terre. A man named Flanck, who had been one of the neighbors aggrieved by the Hildebrand way of hunting pork, became captain of a company of Federal militia. With a detachment of his men Flanck went to the mine, called the two men out of their shaft, ordered them to walk off a few paces, and commander his squad to fire. Both men fell dead. The captain told a citizen he had killed the men because they were friends of Sam Hildebrand. About this time Sam's mother was driven from the homestead by a vigilance mob. Shortly after this a Federal captain named Adolph surrounded the homestead with his company and a mixture of vigilantes, burned down the house and murdered Sam's brother Henry, a boy only 13 years old. When Sam heard of this he swore he would kill every man in any way connected with the affair, and he knew most of them and where they lived. Within the next three years he came very near carrying out his oath literally.

"While these events were happening Sam had put in a crop at the farm he rented on Flat River—there's a big lead mine town there now—but at last Firman McIlvaine found out where he was. McIlvaine got eighty Union soldiers from the garrison at Ironton, in Iron county, to try to capture Hildebrand. Sam was hauling firewood, and had just stopped his team when he saw that the Federals had surrounded him. He grabbed his gun, always at hand, and dashed through a gap in the lines. The soldiers fired at him as he ran; a shot struck him below the knee, breaking a bone. The troops—they were cavalry—pursued him closely. While they stopped to let down a rail fence he hid himself in a gully half full of dry leaves. The soldiers galloped over him back and forth, but couldn't find him. Then they went back and burned the house that sheltered his family.

"Sam told me along in '64 that while he lay in that gully with his leg broken he declared war against the United States in general and Firman McIlvaine and his other personal enemies in particular. That night a friend named Pigg removed Sam and his family to a safe place, where the wounded man lay till his bone knit. As soon as he was able to travel he was taken by friends to the camp of Capt. Bolin, a Confederate, in Green county, Ark. On the way there he fell in with Tom Haile, a regular dare-devil from his old neighborhood up on Big River, and Haile became Sam's chief lieutenant in many a bushwhacking job. After arriving in camp, Hildebrand went to Gen. Jeff Thompson, a Confederate brigadier with movable headquarters then near Bloomfield, Mo. He told his story and the General wrote him a commission as major. Sam couldn't read a word of the document, but he was quite proud to have it.

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"From that day until the close of the war, and in fact till a dozen years after the last gun was fired, Sam Hildebrand was the terror of his enemies and the chief tantalizer of the Federal authorities in southeast Missouri. Making his general rendezvous in Green county, Ark., he went on various bushwhacking trips to his old home, always after some man who had incurred his hate. Once he went as far north as Pike county, a hundred miles above St. Louis, to find a target for old Kill-Devil. Of course he added new enemies to his list as the war went on—men who informed on him and tried to get him captured or killed. Sometimes he made these trips entirely alone, travelling afoot or horseback by night and lying up by day. At other times he took a few picked men, usually Tom Haile and other Missourians who had old scores to settle. On such trips they would sometimes charge through a Federal camp outnumbering them ten to one, shooting as they went and never stopping till they gained a safe place on the other side. Then Sam would creep back to some point from which he could count the corpses and perhaps take another crack at the surprised soldiers.

"It was early in June, 1862, that Sam Hildebrand mounted a horse and started on his first trip back to Big River. From Bolin's men he had learned the names of several Southern sympathizers along his road. Sam had a definite object in view. He reached Flat Woods and began looking around for George Cornecious, the man who had reported his whereabouts to McIlvaine. After two days and nights he found his man, and shot him dead. Cornecious was the first man he ever killed. Afterward he told with glee how delightedly he cut the first notch in his rifle stock. His main purpose, though, was to kill McIlvaine. After seeing that his family were housed and doing well he took some corn bread for rations and lit out on foot for McIlvaine's farm. He selected a field on the top of a high bluff overlooking the river. The men were harvesting wheat there. Some grain had been cut the day before, and Sam supposed that the next day McIlvaine would shock the grain while the negroes cradled. But early in the morning he saw his victim cradling wheat in another part of the field, and he tried to crawl along the bluff to get a place near enough to take good aim. The negroes came too near him as they worked around, and he gave up that plan. He went around under the bluff and had the satisfaction of seeing McIlvaine go down to the ford to water his horse. A limb from a tree was in his way, and he couldn't draw a bead. That night Sam slept under a ledge of the bluff. Next day he tried in vain to get where he could shoot McIlvaine without being caught himself. He slept another night under the ledge, and chewed wheat beads to satisfy hunger. He crossed the river on a fish trap to a rye field of McIlvaine's and lay hidden for several hours. The negroes were cutting rye, but his enemy was not there. At last McIlvaine came to the field and began cradling. He made one round, and just beyond where the bushwacker lay he stopped to whet his blade. Hildebrand shot him through the heart. This shows how persistent the man was; he was out for blood, and when he once got on the trail of an enemy it was all up with the enemy.

On his next trip into Missouri Sam killed an informer who grew too confiding and told him he was out looking for Sam Hildebrand's scalp. He made another trip with Tom Haile and one other man, searching through two counties for a man named Stokes, who on previous expeditions had sheltered him, pretending to be a friend, but later laid plans to deliver him up. Sam had been told that Stokes was an informer, but he wanted to make sure before killing him. When he finally learned that Stokes was at home he went to his house after dark. Stokes received him with his usual friendliness. He told Hildebrand there were no Federals in the neighborhood and asked the bushwacker to stay with him over night. Sam thanked him, but said he would go to a neighbor's a mile away. He then returned to Tom Haile and his other man, hidden in the woods. Haile and the other put on Federal uniforms and rode to Stokes's, approaching from another direction. They pretended to be hot on Hildebrand's trail and asked if Stokes had seen him. Stokes joyfully informed them that Sam had just gone to the neighbor's to spend the night, and he got his gun and went along with them to be in at the death. He was in sure enough. When the army reached the bushwacker, waiting in the woods, a short parley was held and Sam emptied a rifle charge into Stokes.

"Sam once told me that the only time he was ever defeated was by a woman. He saw a fine-looking horse in a barn lot in Madison county. His men were short of mounts, and Sam went into the lot and caught the horse, putting a halter on it. As he was leading the animal away a woman came to the door and screamed: 'You white-livered scum of creation! To steal a poor widow's horse! Why you're worse than Sam Hildebrand!' He let the horse go.

"In the fall of '62 Hildebrand made a

raid into Missouri with three men who had fought under Quantrell. Near Fredriestown they captured a man who turned out to be a Union spy. He had a letter in his pocket telling the names of rebel sympathizers in the neighborhood, written by a man named S. Aggs, who wanted the Federals to burn them out. The bushwhackers shot the spy, then went to Sagg's house, took him into the woods by night and hung him to a tree. Next night the four men charged through a camp of a hundred soldiers, killing five as they went through and capturing four pickets on the other side. Later they hanged the pickets. On the trip back to Arkansas they shot another informer named Slater, who lived in southern Wayne county.

In the spring of '63 Hildebrand took his family to Arkansas, rented a farm and put in a crop. On the way down he was compelled to shoot several men. As soon as his corn sprouted he took another trip to Big River, leaving his wife to attend to the farming. Old Kill-Devil got several more notches as a result of this trip.

"When in September '64 Gen. Sterling Price made his famous raid into Missouri Hildebrand commanded the advance guard but he left the army as soon as he got to St. Francois county to seek out and slaughter some of his old friends, the enemy. Thus, as long as the war lasted, he made jurneys back and forth from Arkansas to Big River neighborhood, helping the confederate cause as he went along, and carrying out his plan of private vengeance whenever he found an opportunity. Sometimes he wore the federal uniform, and at these times he took delight in looking up some men whom he knew to be a Unionist. The bushwacker would gain the other fellow's confidence by cursing Sam Hildebrand—it was popular those days to curse Sam Hildebrand if you were sure of your audience—and then he would listen to the union man's boasting about how he had very nearly captured or killed the terrible bushwacker, then he would take his victim to the woods and string him up to a limb or shoot him in his tracks. Sam seemed to be at his best when he pretended to be a federal soldier on the track of Hildebrand. In this way he discovered his enemies and got rid of them.

"I tell you this ignorant young farmer gave the authorities a heap of trouble. During the last two years of the war almost the sole object of the federal military operations in southeast Missouri seemed to be to kill or catch the Big River bushwacker. Gov. Fletcher offered a reward for him, dead or alive. When Gov. McClurg came into office he renewed the reward, but it was never collected. Sam kept on fighting in the bushwhacking department of the confederacy for nearly two months after the surrender of Lee and Johnston, but he was paroled on the 26th of May and went back to the farm his family still occupied in Green county, Ark. He raised a big corn crop there in the summer of '65. Next year he rented a bigger farm and was farming on a much larger scale, with fine prospects, when he was arrested and jailed at Jacksonport on suspicion of being mixed up in a murder. He lay there with a ball and chain attached to him for four months. At last some of his friends managed to cut the fetters off and he escaped. Meantime, his brother William, who had served through the war in the Union army, moved the ex bushwacker's family back to the old home on Big River, believing Sam would surely be hanged.

"Sam went at once to the old home, willing to forgive and forget; he was sick of fighting and had pretty nearly cleaned out all his enemies anyhow. But the few old vigilantes who still remained objected to his presence, so he went to a place on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, about forty miles south of St. Louis, where he made a living by chopping cordwood. I suppose he could have robbed trains, but he didn't; he wanted to settle down and support his family. So once more he came back and took a farm a few miles from his old home. Dozens of men, citizens and detectives were eager for the State reward, hounded him; he was shot from the bushes and badly wounded in the leg. While this wound was healing, he lay at his uncle's in a log house near Big River Mills, and here he fought his last big battle. Sheriff Breckinridge, of St. Francois county, with a strong posse, determined to capture him while he lay wounded. Surrounding the house, they opened up a lively fire. For two days Sam Hildebrand shot at the officers through a small crack between the logs. They rattled the house with bullets. Sam killed and wounded several of his besiegers, but was not hit himself. While the others were carrying away one of their dead, he crawled out of the house into the woods; friends found him and hauled him to a farmhouse in a wagon, and to still another house, followed by the Sheriff's men. As a place of last resort, Sam was taken to a cave opening from a high bluff on the bank of Big River, where in war times he had often found safe retreat. It is still called Hildebrand's cave. A large company of militia re-enforced the Sheriff and tried to dislodge the outlaw, but one man could hold that cave against a hundred. He finally escaped to Illinois.

As I said before, he died with his boots on. In 1877, I think it was, there was a saloon brawl in the little town of Pinckneyville, Ill. A man was killed. One story was to the effect that he was a stranger and that somebody who knew Sam Hildebrand identified the corpse as that of the former bushwacker. However, a man came forward and tried to collect the reward, with a story to the effect that he killed Hildebrand with full knowledge of his identity. He said that the outlaw got into a quarrel with him, and being drunk and off his guard thought to frighten him by proclaiming himself Sam Hildebrand; then the man stabbed him in the back. I believe, however, the reward was never paid. The body was brought to Farmington, my country seat, where both friends and foes fully identified it as that of Samuel Hildebrand."