

Lane's Army

By David L. Bristow

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“Our cellars contained barrels of [gun]powder and boxes of rifles. Often our chairs, tables, beds and such places were covered with what weapons every one carried with him, so that if one needed and got time to rest a little in the day time, we had to remove the Kansas furniture, or rest with loaded revolvers, cartridge boxes and bowie knives piled around them, and boxes of swords under the bed. Were not our houses overfilled?”

That is how Mrs. George Gaston, a Tabor, Iowa farm wife, remembered the summer of 1856. The weapons she described belonged to “free-state emigrants,” Kansas-bound settlers from the Northern states. Together, these hundreds of pioneers were known as “Lane’s Army of the North” after their self-styled leader, Col. James H. Lane.² They traveled across Iowa by the “Lane Trail,” a route blazed 140 years ago this summer.

The emigrants, and those who helped them, were participants in a struggle between North and South for control of Kansas, a dress-rehearsal for the Civil War which would begin five years later. Though relatively few people were killed in “Bleeding Kansas”—at least by the standards of the nationwide bloodbath which followed—in its day the Kansas struggle dominated American politics. At stake was not only a new territory, but the national balance of power North and South, and with it the future of slavery in the U.S. Both sides saw Kansas as the key to the preservation of their way of life, of their vision of what America should be.³

Slavery: “the dangerous Magazine...to which any Fanatic, Knave, or fool may at any time apply the Torch....”

—J. H. Williams, Iowa farmer⁴

In 18th and 19th century America, the slavery issue had been like a unshakable virus, at times burning fever-hot, at times lying dormant—but resisting all attempts to cure it through compromise. In 1854, the year Kansas Territory was opened to settlement, the nation’s temperature soared once again.

The cause was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened the two new territories to white settlement. The key provision of the bill was “popular sovereignty,” a euphemism which meant that each territory, upon its admission as a state, would vote as to whether slavery was to be legal or illegal within its borders.⁵

Passage of the bill outraged many Northerners, for it violated the Missouri Compromise, an 1820 agreement in which admitted Missouri as a slave state but which allowed only free states to be admitted north of Missouri’s southern border. Both Kansas and Nebraska are north of that line.⁶

After the new territories opened, Southerners conceded Nebraska to the North, but insisted that Kansas was to become a slave state. Northerners—though few supported the abolition of slavery—feared a further encroachment of “the Slave Power” upon American society. Most who opposed slavery’s expansion did so not because of slavery’s injustice to blacks, but because they believed slavery to be an economic threat to non-slaveholding whites.⁷

Thus was born the Kansas struggle. Settlers poured into the territory from both the Northern and the Southern states. In the North, emigrant aid societies sprang up and raised money to sponsor free-state emigration to Kansas. But emigration to Kansas was quickly becoming a dangerous business: both sides resorted to threats and violence to drive their enemies out of the territory. After Lawrence, Kansas—a free-state town—was burned by an army of Missourians, one Northerner began raising an army of his own. His name was Col. James H. Lane.⁸

“Is there an Illinoisan who says enforce these monstrous iniquities called laws? Show me the man! The people of Kansas will never obey them. They are being butchered, and one and all will die first! As for myself, I am going back to Kansas, where there is an indictment pending against

me for high treason. Were the rope about my neck, I would say that as to the Kansas code it shall not be enforced—never!—NEVER!”

—James H. Lane⁹

In Chicago on May 31, 1856, free-state militia leader Jim Lane addressed a crowd of thousands. Lane, “fresh from the smoking ruins of Lawrence,” moved the crowd to a frenzy of excitement. “He sways them like a field of reeds shaken by the wind,” said one of Lane’s contemporaries.¹⁰

Lane, a Mexican War hero and former Congressman from Indiana, was a savvy political opportunist and a master of publicity. A Democrat whose political career had floundered after he voted for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lane emerged in Kansas as an anti-slavery leader and a would-be Republican senator. Lane’s charisma and military flair soon attracted a sizable following. Even free-state emigrants not affiliated with Lane (and most were not) were known as “Lane’s Expedition” or “Lane’s Army.”¹¹

By mid-June, the vanguard of Lane’s Army was headed for Kansas. These 78 men, chosen at the Chicago meeting, were well-armed and supplied with farming implements and a year’s provisions. Travelling by steamboat up the Missouri River, their plans came to an abrupt halt at Lexington, Missouri on June 20.

At the levee, a large group of armed men boarded the steamer. Taken by surprise, the Chicagoans were forced to give up their weapons before being allowed to continue upriver. By the time they reached Kansas, however, the boat had been boarded twice more and the free-staters had been robbed of most of their possessions. Finally, with Kansas just across the river, they were held prisoner in the boat’s cabin, then sent back downriver to Illinois. The Missouri River blockade, or “political quarantine,” had begun.¹²

“The flower of Lane’s army are now prisoners of war, and will be shipped back home disgraced and cowed!” rejoiced the *Squatter Sovereign*, a pro-slavery newspaper. “If this is the material we have to encounter in Kansas, we have but little fear of the result. Fifty thousand such ‘cattle’ could not subdue the Spartan band now in possession of Kansas.” In the same issue, the editors added, “We are of the opinion, if the

citizens of Leavenworth City or Weston would *hang* one or two boat loads of Abolitionists it would do more toward establishing peace in Kansas than all the speeches that have been delivered in Congress during the present session. *Let the experiment be tried.*"¹³

" . . . People are fleeing for their lives, and leaving claims and companions to save themselves alive. Women are not deemed safe from outrage, and are on the wing for safety and protection. Colonel Lane is anxiously looked for, and all hope is centered on his coming."

*—Letter from Leavenworth, Kansas, published in the Boston Evening Telegraph, June 6, 1856.*¹⁴

The river was closed. But if the free-staters could not go by steamboat, they would go by rail—at least as far as Iowa City. There the railroad to the West ended. The Mississippi had been bridged earlier that year, making Iowa's capital city a jumping-off place for points further west, such as the frontier settlements of Fort Des Moines or Omaha City.¹⁵

The free-staters had a different destination in mind, and so avoided the established trails. Trail organizers chose a route across southern Iowa—southern, so as to approach Kansas more directly, yet north enough of the Missouri line to be safe from border raids. On July 4, the first party departed on the "Iowa Route," or as it became known, the "Lane Trail." From Iowa City, the emigrants passed through Sigourney, Oskaloosa, Knoxville, Indianola, then turned south toward Osceola. From there, they continued westward through Quincy (in west-central Adams county; it has since vanished.), then on to Tabor and Civil Bend (Percival) and across the Missouri to Nebraska City. From there, the trail led south toward Topeka, Kansas.¹⁶

Maps of the region, when they were available at all, were sketchy. Instead, when outside the more populated areas, the emigrants relied on trail markers as they crossed the Iowa prairie. Where trees were available, one would be burnt or "blazed" to mark the route. (Thus, the one who did this was a "trailblazer.") On treeless hills, piles of stones would be

erected. These came to be known as “Lane’s chimneys.”¹⁷

The emigrants traveled in many small groups, each with its own elected leader.¹⁸ While in Iowa, these parties were usually greeted warmly in the towns along the way. In Osceola, however, a party led by S.W. Eldridge ran into trouble when a group of Southern sympathizers, led by the local blacksmith, threatened to disrupt a town meeting.

The wife of one of the emigrant leaders was scheduled to speak at the meeting, but “the weak-minded element,” as Eldridge called them, objected to a “woman’s right to meddle in politics.” When the news reached the emigrant camp, however, “the boys seized upon it as offering a job that came strictly within their line of business, and quickly devised a counterplot.”

That evening, as the meeting began, the blacksmith rose and gave the signal for a riot. At that moment, Eldridge grabbed him from behind and called for order. The emigrants, dispersed throughout the crowd, “instantly rose in such force as to command implicit obedience.” The troublemakers found themselves outnumbered by the emigrants and unsupported by their townspeople. The blacksmith, meanwhile, “was snatched from my grasp and compelled to play anvil to the sledge-hammer fists of the boys till they had forged him into a quiet listener to a ‘woman meddling with politics.’”¹⁹

“The men are ready for a fight, pity that such a man as Lane is at the head. We shall do all we can to keep a bit in his mouth.”

—Dr. S. G. Howe, Tabor, Iowa, July 27, 1856²⁰

By late July, wagon train after wagon train had arrived in Tabor, transforming the quiet town into something resembling a military camp. The group numbered about 400 settlers, only a fourth of whom were actually “Lane’s men.” Nevertheless, to the south rumors were circulating that Lane was approaching Topeka with 2,000 armed invaders.²¹

Fearing the worst, the pro-slavery Kansas territorial government called for help. Some U.S. Army troops were

already watching the northern border of Kansas, but Governor Wilson Shannon now demanded that their commanding general use all available troops to meet “Lane’s party” at the border. The general, not wanting to interfere in the situation, declined to reinforce the border guards.²²

To the north, the free-state emigrants gathering around Tabor and Nebraska City did not yet know of the general’s reluctance. All they knew was that regular army troops were reported to be waiting for them at the Kansas line—and such a fight against Uncle Sam would not only involve longer odds than they had counted on, but would also involve treason. Morale plummeted. Dr. Samuel Howe, representing one of the emigrant aid societies sponsoring the expedition, warned that if Lane and company ran across the Army, the federals “will, I doubt not, demand their arms; this may be refused and a collision ensue.”²³

To complicate matters further, 1856 was a presidential election year. In November, Democrat James Buchanan would face John C. Fremont of the newly-formed Republican Party. Since many Republican leaders were active in the emigrant aid movement, a battle against federal troops would be a political disaster.

By late July, Dr. Howe had made up his mind: Jim Lane had to go. Since Howe represented an organization which was largely funding the “expedition,” he was in a position to make his views count.²⁴ Lane, who had never been appointed as commander in the first place, was asked on July 31 to end his association with the free-state emigrants. Bearing the bad news was Lane’s friend Samuel Walker, a free-state “captain” who later reported Lane’s reaction:

“Walker, if you say the people of Kansas don’t want me, it’s all right, and I’ll blow my brains out. I can never go back to the states and look the people in the face and tell them that as soon as I got these Kansas friends of mine fairly into danger I had to abandon them. I can’t do it. No matter what I say in my own defense no one will believe it. I’ll blow my brains out and end the thing right here.”²⁵

Ten years later, Lane would do just as he had threatened, but for now, Walker quickly reassured Lane that the people of Kansas did indeed want him. Lane, regaining his composure, then convinced Walker that they should ride into Kansas

together. This they did, joined by Walker's men and by another free-state captain, a man of some notoriety. His name was John Brown.²⁶

"I have only a short time to live—only one death to die, and I will die fighting for this cause. There will be no peace in this land until slavery is done for."

—John Brown, 1856²⁷

Riding hard into Kansas in early August, Lane, Walker and Brown each had a tumultuous month ahead of him. During the next few weeks, men under Lane's command reduced two Southern forts before Lane abruptly (and without explanation) departed and turned over command to Walker, who then destroyed a third fort. John Brown—whose June battle victory was well-known among local free-staters, but whose May murder of five proslavery men was not—fought and lost a battle to defend the town of Osawatimie on August 31. Brown's son Frederick died that day, shot down by an enemy before the fight began.²⁸

Men arriving by way of the Lane Trail participated in these fights, having crossed into Kansas without being intercepted by the Federals. Though there had been a steady attrition of emigrants, who left the trail to claim land and found new towns along the way, many arrived in Topeka and Lawrence ready to reinforce their beleaguered free-state comrades.²⁹ The tide began turning in favor of the North, though the violence—the looting, threats, shootings, burning of cabins, and other crimes committed by both sides—would continue sporadically for several years.

Back in Iowa, emigrant parties continued across the Lane Trail through the fall. The blockade of the Missouri River continued into 1857, but its effectiveness, if not negated, had been overcome. The trail continued to be used until the Civil War, and it proved as useful for discouraged emigrants leaving Kansas as it did for eager ones going there.³⁰

The trail had another use as well, one which was first demonstrated in February, 1857. Dr. Ira Blanchard, a Tabor resident and ardent abolitionist, had convinced John Brown

that the trail would be a good escape route for fugitive slaves. Brown helped three slaves get to Topeka, placing them under the care of a man named John Armstrong, who took them northward in his wagon. In Nebraska City, a group of men halted the wagon and looked inside, but found nothing—the slaves being hidden beneath the wagon’s false bottom. Next, they had to cross the Missouri River, which was flowing thick with large chunks of ice. The ferryman, considering the crossing too dangerous (or perhaps he guessed at the wagon’s cargo) had to be “persuaded with a Colt’s navy [revolver] before he would undertake the passage.” Safely across the river, the slaves were taken to Dr. Blanchard, and eventually to Canada. Thirty-four people in Fremont County are known to have participated in “Underground Railroad” activity, the most of any Iowa county.³¹

In 1861, Kansas was admitted as a free state into a Union already split asunder by secession. By then, Jim Lane was on his way to becoming a U.S. Senator, while John Brown had become a legend for his ill-fated attack on a federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. Brown, with several Iowans in his group, travelled to Virginia with 200 breechloading rifles he had been storing in the cellar of a minister’s house back in Tabor, Iowa. Attacking at night with fewer than two dozen men, Brown seized the arsenal, then waited for local slaves to rally. Brown planned to arm them, then launch a major insurrection. But no slaves came. Instead, most of Brown’s party was killed or captured.³² Predicting more bloodshed, Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859. In December of the next year, South Carolina announced its secession from the Union. The war came the following spring.

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- ¹ John Todd, *Early Settlement and Growth of Western Iowa* (Des Moines, 1906), 122.
- ² A. T. Andreas, *History of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), 137. He later became a U.S. senator (Kansas) and Civil War general (U.S.).
- ³ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: the Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 45-47, 130-31.
- ⁴ John K. Folmar, ed. *"This State of Wonders": Letters from an Iowa Farm Family 1858-1861* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 59.
- ⁵ Leland Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), 124.
- ⁶ Sage, 133-34.
- ⁷ Foner, 46-47.
- ⁸ S. W. Eldridge, "Recollections of Early Days in Kansas," *Publications of the Kansas State Historical Society* 2 (1930), 69-70; Andreas, 136-37.
- ⁹ William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, Vol. 2 (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1918): 598.
- ¹⁰ John J. Ingalls, quoted in William E. Connelley, "The Lane-Jenkins Claim Contest," *Kansas Historical Collections* XVI (1923-25): 35-36.
- ¹¹ Patricia L. Faust, ed. *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 424; Andreas, 137, 141.
- ¹² Kendall E. Bailes, *Rider on the Wind: Jim Lane and Kansas* (Shawnee Mission, Kansas: The Wagon Wheel Press, 1962), 57; Wendell Holmes Stephenson, "The Political Career of General James H. Lane," *Publications of the Kansas State Historical Society* 3 (1930), 71; Andreas, 138.
- ¹³ *Squatter Sovereign*, July 1, 1856, quoted in Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, 603.
- ¹⁴ Stephenson, 71.
- ¹⁵ Sage, III.
- ¹⁶ Eldridge, 75.; Andreas, 141; Stephenson, 72; William E. Connelley, "The Lane Trail," *Kansas Historical Collections*, XIII (1913-14), map facing 268.
- ¹⁷ Noble, 32; Stephenson, 72; Eldridge, 83.
- ¹⁸ Eldridge, 72.
- ¹⁹ Eldridge, 74.
- ²⁰ Noble, 45.
- ²¹ Todd, 120-21; Stephenson, 72, 75; Andreas, 141.
- ²² Eldridge, 81-82.
- ²³ quoted in Noble, 44-45.
- ²⁴ Eldridge, 80-81; Noble, 45.
- ²⁵ C. S. Gleed, "Samuel Walker," *Kansas Historical Collections*, Vol. 6, 267.
- ²⁶ Faust, 424; Stephenson, 75.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 170.
- ²⁸ Gleed, 268-69; Oates, 128-37, 151, 168-70.
- ²⁹ Eldridge, 84.
- ³⁰ Todd, 121-26; Noble, 29-30.
- ³¹ Connelley, *Kansas Historical Collections*, 269; Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Macmillan, 1898. Reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 410.
- ³² Noble, 75; Oates, 289-300.