

On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand: The Story of Sam Davis



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The heavy spring-wagon attracted little notice as it rumbled into Columbia, Tennessee, in early December of 1863. Pulled by two mules, the conveyance carried but two passengers, a man and boy. Their journey was a sad one and it was readily explained in a single glance. Behind them --on the bed of the wagon-- lay a coffin.

With the reins in his hands, John C. Kennedy guided the wagon through the busy streets. He wanted no trouble and when a picket ordered him to a halt on the southern outskirts of town, he swallowed hard, told little Oscar to say nothing, and then hoped for the best.

Identification? Kennedy nodded and dug nervously into his pocket, producing a pass. But for some reason, the sentry hardly glanced at the paper, his curiosity drawn first to the coffin and then to the young boy. With hardly a word, he waved them through.

The same thing happened a day later when the coffin-laden wagon approached the town of Pulaski. Puzzled by this lack of asserted Federal authority, Kennedy and Oscar entered the town and parked the wagon near the square. It was the next move that would be the hardest.

John Kennedy had come to Pulaski at the request of Oscar's family. No longer could they deny the rumors that it might be *their* 21-year-old son who had been hung as a spy in the last week of November. At first it seemed impossible and they had discounted the talk. But the report persisted. Unwilling to believe yet hopelessly drawn to free themselves of this torment, they had asked Kennedy to go and find out. And if it was true, they'd be forever obliged if he'd bring the body of their boy back home for burial.

The father had advised Kennedy that once he got to Pulaski, he should contact an old family acquaintance, a Mr. Richardson, who was clerk of the county court there. To identify the remains, the mother, her voice breaking, described her son's boots and gave Kennedy a piece of the plaid linsey that she had sewn as a lining for her son's jacket. And in case there was any question, well, their youngest son, Oscar, could ride along. Then with a meal sack containing a boiled ham and a half bushel of corn pones to see them through, the twosome departed.

They reached Nashville that evening. Unable to get an audience with the Federal authorities, Kennedy procured a coffin, a "metallic case and box" as he described it. The next morning, after first denying their request for a pass, Gen. Lovell Rousseau reluctantly issued Kennedy--a boyhood friend from old Kentucky--the necessary paper to clear the city. But he warned his old friend that his authority did not extend into Columbia.

Now, thinking back on the events of the last several days, Kennedy could only marvel at how easily they had gotten into Pulaski. Yet he did not relish meeting the executioners of his friend and as he got out of the wagon, he steeled himself for trouble. Instructing Oscar to hold the mules, he headed for the courthouse to see the provost marshal for a pass and, as he remembered years later, to "find out what he would do with us."

The Federal official eyed Kennedy then gruffly demanded to know how he got into Pulaski. Kennedy meekly handed him the pass.

"This is no account here," stated the officer bluntly, then as he narrowed his eyes on Kennedy, he demanded, "What do you want?"

John Kennedy replied forthrightly that he had come at the request of the family for the body of the young man who had been hanged. The parents simply wanted him brought home.

Instantly, the officer's whole attitude softened and he rose and offered his hand in welcome. With emotion in his voice, he put Kennedy at ease, assuring him he would do everything in his power to facilitate the request. For a moment there was an awkward silence as both men reassessed each other. Finally, not knowing what else to say, the officer spoke. "Tell them, for me, that he died the bravest of the brave, an honor to them and with the respect of every man in this command."

Kennedy was stunned as the officer handed him return passes and signed a permit for them to take up the body. This was far more cooperation than he had expected and, still unsure of his reception, he inquired if he would encounter any trouble or interference at the graveyard.

The officer was adamant. "No sir. If you do, I'll give you a company--yes, a regiment if necessary."

Bewildered by this unexpected cordiality, Kennedy returned to the wagon to find Oscar surrounded by soldiers inquiring if he was there to claim the body of the young man just hung. Oscar could only nod, no doubt frightened by all of this attention, whereupon several of the soldiers, moved by the scene of the somber lad and coffin, choked back that the dead man "ought not to have been hung," while others, fearful of retribution from the Confederates or perhaps even a Higher Power, felt they would certainly "suffer for it sooner or later."

Exhumation began the next morning and as the gravediggers labored, curious soldiers edged close. Speaking in hushed tones with kepis in hand, they asked if they might not be of some service. Kennedy acknowledged their respect, but politely declined their offer.

The grim work continued and once the box was lifted from the ground and the lid removed, Kennedy looked in to make the identification. "I took from my pocket the piece of his jacket lining and saw that they were alike." Removing the white hood still over the head of the corpse, Kennedy saw that the face was indeed "recognizable."

As they gently lifted the body to the "metallic case," more soldiers appeared, gathering quietly in lines with caps off. What was the meaning of this unexpected tribute from the men who had put his friend to death?

Back at the provost marshal's office, the chaplain who had attended the condemned soldier in the days before his execution, gave Kennedy a few personal effects--a little book and some brass vest and coat buttons. It was from this man that John Kennedy finally learned the extraordinary circumstances of the hanging.

Now, he no longer wondered at the reverential reception accorded them as they moved through Pulaski. Everyone wanted a last look at the casket of the unforgettable young soldier. And as if by magic, word of their coming spread ahead of them.

At the Duck River near Columbia, Kennedy found that the ferry had been halted by military decree. Approaching the officer in charge on the riverbank, Kennedy asked if there might not be some way to cross the river. The officer eyed him, then, in a moment of recognition, spotted the casket in the wagon. Briskly he turned to an orderly and said, "Go down and order the ferry boat to take that team and corpse over the river."

A steep defile to the water's edge lay before them, but as Kennedy returned to Oscar, he found the boy and wagon surrounded by dozens of soldiers in blue.

"Stranger, we know who this is," one of them said to him as he neared. "You get in the wagon; we'll see it goes down safe."

With infinite care, the Billy Yanks "practically carried the wagon aboard the boat." But once the ferry was across and tied to the opposite bank, another hill, steeper and longer, faced the travelers. Firmly--for they would not take no for an answer--the blue uniformed volunteer escorts told Kennedy to sit in the wagon and drive while they safely muscled the conveyance--with hand and shoulder--to the crest of the hill. Once on top, they stood in the road, and as Kennedy and little Oscar nodded their appreciation, the boys in blue raised their caps in silent salute.

A hero was going home. [1]

Brig. Gen. Grenville M. Dodge eyed the young man carefully. Just hours before, members of the 7th Kansas Cavalry had captured several suspicious individuals about 15 miles outside Pulaski, Tennessee. There was little doubt that they were all active rebel sympathizers and Dodge quickly ordered them locked in the Giles County jail. It seemed like just another routine arrest but the Jayhawkers had discovered maps of the Nashville defenses hidden under this fellow's saddle along with incriminating letters, newspapers, and dispatches in his boots and clothing. [2]

From this evidence, Dodge knew that one of "Coleman's Scouts" stood before him. For weeks, he had been "very anxious" to capture this "Coleman," and break up his band of spies that lurked east of Pulaski. Now it seemed, with at least one of "Coleman's" men in custody, he had his opportunity.

Dodge found his prisoner--a modest, unassuming fellow named Sam Davis--to be "a fine, soldierly looking young man, dressed in a faded Federal soldier's coat. He had a frank, open face, which was inclined to brightness." But as Dodge talked, conversing "pleasantly" with the captive in order to gain his confidence, he noted that Davis had little to say.

I tried to impress upon him the danger he was in and that I knew he was only a messenger, and held out to him the hope of lenient treatment if he would answer truthfully, as far as he could, my questions. [3]

Who had given him this critical information? And to whom was he to deliver it? Even more so, Dodge asked, who was "Coleman" and where could he be found?

Davis listened attentively as the general probed but "made no definite answer." Dodge then dropped all pretense of cordiality and bluntly explained to his prisoner the penalty for spying. Did he really prefer silence and a hangman's noose? [4]

Finding that his prisoner still would not cooperate, Dodge sent him back to the county jail to join the other prisoners. Surely once this Sam Davis considered his dark future from behind bars, he would be more forthcoming. Just to be sure, Dodge ordered his provost marshal, Capt. W. F. Armstrong, to place an informant in the cell near Davis. Perhaps that would work. [5]

But the scout kept his own counsel. Pvt. C. B. Van Pelt of the 81st Ohio Infantry, detailed as a clerk in Armstrong's office, took a liking to Sam Davis. Every morning he called the roll of prisoners and, as he reminisced years later, "mingled with them as man to man." With Sam Davis, he remembered, "we talked much of the similar circumstances under which we had left our homes." Van Pelt was struck by Davis' patriotism, but even more so by Sam's "even tenor of gentleness," concluding that "had I been placed in his position, he would doubtless have proffered me the same sympathy I endeavored to extend to him." [6]

But despite the best efforts of the provost marshal's spies, Sam Davis let nothing slip. Unable to get answers by subterfuge, Gen. Dodge again had the Confederate brought before him. This time he held nothing back. Davis would be tried as a spy and with the mountain of evidence against him, he would surely be convicted and sentenced to hang. But if he identified who had passed him the information and if he fingered "Coleman," he would be given a horse and safe passage through the lines and save himself a trip to the gallows.

Dodge expected Davis to grab the offer. But to his amazement, the 21-year old scout "very quietly and firmly refused to do it." [7]

Now the general had no choice but to convene a court martial, which after hearing the evidence, quickly found the Tennessean guilty and sentenced him to hang. It fell to Pvt. Van Pelt to inform Sam Davis of the sentence.

I read to him a copy of his death-sentence [yet] a reprieve was extended, which I read to him [also], if he would inform us where "Coleman" was. He stood before me, an uncrowned hero, his eyes flashing, and said: "I will die a thousand deaths rather than betray my cause." We were both moved to tears and remained silent for a time. He then talked of his family. [8]

News of the verdict spread quickly through the streets of Pulaski. At least one delegation, headed by Mrs. John A. Jackson, personally appealed to Gen. Dodge for leniency. Others sought out provost marshal Armstrong and Chaplain James Young of the 81st Ohio. Certainly *something* could be done to save this young man!

But the most pathetic appeal came from Coleman Davis Smith, Sam Davis' personal servant. Two years younger than Sam, Coleman had been "given to Sam as a play fellow" while still a boy. When Sam joined the war effort, so did Coleman, and as he remembered years later, "We slept anywhere and ate anywhere." Captured beside his master, he was also locked away in the county jail when Van Pelt brought the bad news. [9]

Earnestly, Coleman begged Sam to "tell what the Yankees wanted him to tell," but Davis shook his head. He would not compromise the identity of his leader. The slave, desperate to save his lifelong friend, then asked if *he* might not tell, but again Sam Davis said no. *No one* must tell; never would he permit the sacrifice of a friend and both men knew why; unknown to Gen. Dodge, Capt. H. B. Shaw, alias "Coleman," the chief of the scouts, languished in an adjacent cell! [10]

On the day before the execution, Sam penned a last letter to his family in Rutherford County.
Pulaski, Giles County, Tenn., Nov. 26, 1863

Dear Mother: Oh, how painful it is to write you! I have got to die to-morrow--to be hanged by the Federals. Mother, do not grieve for me. I must bid you good-by forevermore. Mother, I do not fear to die. Give my love to all.

Your son, Samuel Davis

Mother, tell the children all to be good. I wish I could see you all once more, but I never will any more.

Mother and Father, do not forget me. Think of me when I am dead, but do not grieve for me. It will not do any good. Father, you can send after my remains if you want to do so. They will be at Pulaski, Tenn. I will leave some things, too, with the hotel keeper for you. Pulaski is in Giles county, Tenn., south of Columbia.

S.D. [11]

That evening, Sam received a visit from Chaplain Young. Time was short now, yet with some of the other prisoners, he joined Young in a short devotional that included the singing of "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." For the rest of his life, Rev. James Young never forgot the "animated voice" of the condemned man. [12]

At ten o'clock the next morning--one witness remembered the day as "fair and warm"--they came for him. To a local Methodist minister, the Rev. Mr. Lawrence, Davis left his overcoat and a few personal effects; would he see that they got to his family? [13]

Guards then tied his hands behind him and shackled his legs. Then they walked him outside. Slowly, awkwardly, he climbed aboard a wagon. He stood there for a moment, searching the crowd. Then shifting his direction, he faced the courthouse jail, looking for familiar faces that might be watching from the windows. There! Awkwardly, he bent forward against the bonds that held him. This was all he could do--a final, painful bow--to acknowledge the deep bonds of sacrifice and comradeship shared with the men who crowded the barred windows for a last glimpse of him. [14]

With a coffin his only seat, Sam Davis sat down in discomfort; the fetters around his feet pinched painfully tight. Chaplain Young took a knife and cut the boots at the ankle to relieve the pressure. Then, guarded by a sea of armed soldiers, the wagon rumbled toward the gallows erected on East Hill. At "precisely five minutes past ten o'clock," the wagon entered the hollow square of soldiers--four deep--that surrounded the scaffold. [15]

Sam Davis stepped from the wagon and seated himself for a moment on a bench at the foot of the gallows. He seemed resolved to his fate, "glancing casually at his coffin as it was taken from the wagon." [16]

To provost marshal Armstrong he inquired how long he had to live. "Fifteen minutes," came the reply. Perhaps then, might Capt. Armstrong tell him the latest news from the battlefield?

Dispatches from Chattanooga were filled with reports of a Union victory at Missionary Ridge, Armstrong replied.

The prisoner quietly expressed "much regret," then, almost as an afterthought, remarked, "The boys will have to fight the rest of the battles without me."

It was now time. Slowly, so as not to stumble, Sam Davis climbed the steps. Armstrong approached. "I am sorry to be compelled to perform this painful duty."

"It does not hurt me, Captain. I am innocent and I am prepared to die; so do not think hard of it."

Then again, but now for the last time, came the question: Would he not save himself and identify "Coleman?" It was not yet too late!

But the answer came back still full of resolve. "Do you suppose that I would betray a friend? No, sir: I would die a thousand times first!" And then, after a prayer with Chaplain Young, he stepped upon the trap, turned to Armstrong and said, "I am ready." [17]

The sacrifice of Sam Davis quickly assumed the mystique of legend. The story of his heroic stand in the face of death was told and retold around countless Southern campfires and after the war was lost, around the impoverished dinner tables and blackened hearths of a war-ravaged region.

But the indelible picture of the young martyr also went north with the victors. Pvt. John S. Randal of the 61st Illinois Infantry asserted to his dying day that in his entire time in the war, he never "witnessed such a pathetic and heroic scene," noting unabashedly that he had sat at attention on his horse that day with "tears streaming down his face". [18]

Others were less eloquent but just as sincere. Pvt. A. W. Bill remembered hearing many soldiers in the 61st later swear softly to themselves: "I wish that man could have gotten away." [19]

After the execution, Pvt. Van Pelt found that "night and day came and went, but [writing in 1897] I could not forget, nor have I to this day forgotten, that boy hero. His image has been before me these thirty-four years. God bless his beloved memory, his friends, and comrades!" [20]

In 1909, the official monument to the memory of Sam Davis was dedicated on the grounds of the State Capitol in Nashville. A tablet placed there notes that the heroic bronze figure was funded by private contributions from every state in the American union.

But those who seek the essence of this American hero travel to nearby Smyrna. There in the backyard of the family home, Charles Louis and Jane Simmons Davis committed the body of their boy to the ground. And there, for more than a century now, visitors have continued to come. [21]

*O Southland! Bring your laurels,
And add your wreath, O North!
Let glory claim the Hero's name
And tell the world his worth.* [22]

Endnotes

1. Kennedy's account of his wagon trip to Pulaski is told in CV, Vol. 4, pp. 35-6. [Click here to continue reading where you left](#)

off.

2. Dodge recorded his recollections of Davis in a letter to the editor of CV, 15 June 1897, later published in Vol. 5, pp. 355-7. Sam Davis was captured late in the afternoon of Friday, 19 November 1863; SHSP, Vol. 25, p. 233. [continue](#)

3. CV, Vol. 5, p. 356. [continue](#)

4. *Ibid.* [continue](#)

5. *Ibid.* [continue](#)

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 554-6. [continue](#)

7. A number of chroniclers of the Sam Davis legend have confused or manufactured quotes in their retelling of the story. Gen. Dodge, the only witness to this interview, left only his impressions, quoted here from his letter of 1897. [continue](#)

8. CV, Vol. 5, p. 555. [continue](#)

9. Coleman Davis Smith's recollections were published in *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans' Questionnaire*, Gustavus W. Dyer and John T. Moore, compilers, (1985), Vol. 5, pp. 1973-5. [continue](#)

10. *Ibid.* [continue](#)

11. As published in CV, Vol. 3, p. 183. [continue](#)

12. *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 358. [continue](#)

13. Although Kennedy took receipt of Davis' personal effects from Chaplain Young, Lindsley, p. 170, states that Sam Davis gave his keepsakes to Rev. Lawrence. [continue](#)

14. Pvt. A. W. Bill of the 61st Illinois Infantry watched the execution from the ranks and left his recollections in CV, Vol. 17, p. 285; Joshua Brown, a fellow prisoner, remembered that Sam Davis, "seeing us at the windows, bowed to us his last farewell." *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 183. [continue](#)

15. *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 358. The most contemporary account extant is a clipping from the *Pulaski Chanticleer* of 2 December 1863, republished in CV, Vol. 17, p. 279. Cited herein as Chanticleer. [continue](#)

16. Chanticleer. [continue](#)

17. Sam Davis' last questioner is most often identified as one "Captain Chickasaw" of Gen. Dodge's staff. Davis' last words and indeed, the quotations attributed to all the participants near the gallows have been recorded many times with slight variations. Those given here are from *Ibid.*, the most immediate account after the execution. [continue](#)

18. CV, Vol. 17, p. 185. [continue](#)

19. *Ibid.*, p. 285. [continue](#)

20. *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 555. [continue](#)

21. Both the Sam Davis and Dewitt Smith Jobe Confederate Medals of Honor are on public display at the Sam Davis Memorial Home, Smyrna, Tennessee. [continue](#)

22. From the poem, *Sam Davis*, by Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

<http://www.tennessee-scv.org/samdavis.html>