

Boy Martyr of the Confederacy

Sam Davis

By Dr. Michael R. Bradley

The sun was shining. No clouds marred the sky. The gallows was tall. Eternity was nigh. Sam Davis was 21 years old.

Sam did not want to die; but he was willing to do so. He had just uttered his last words, "If I had a thousand lives, I would lose them all before I would betray a friend or a confidence." He had been offered his life and a clear path back to Confederate lines if he would give his captors the name of the commander of his unit of scouts, but Sam knew life would not be worth living if he proved himself unworthy of existence. Sam Davis died within a few minutes of uttering those words, but one-hundred-fifty years later his name is still remembered as a synonym for bravery, fidelity, and honor.

Nothing in the early life of Davis marked him as being of heroic stuff. He was born near Smyrna, Tennessee, on October 6, 1842, the son of Charles Lewis Davis and Jane Simmons Davis.

Jane was the second wife of Charles Davis, his first wife having died, and Sam had three brothers and a sister from the first marriage as well as siblings younger than he. The Davis family owned a large farm and some twenty slaves which marked them as a comfortably well-off family, though not by any means were they among the plantation aristocracy.

Sam attended the local schools as a boy and, at age 19, went to Nashville to enroll at the Western



This is an early war picture of Sam Davis and his brother John who was also a member of the Coleman scouts.

Military Academy. This school had a good reputation and included on its faculty Edmund Kirby Smith and Bushrod Johnson, both future Confederate generals. In 1861, when Tennessee declared itself independent and then joined the Confederacy, Sam left school and joined the First Tennessee Infantry commanded by Colonel George Maney. The 1st did its training at Camp Harris at Allisonia before being sent to Virginia on July 10, 1861. In the Old Dominion the Tennessee boys served under Robert E. Lee in the Cheat Mountain Campaign and then under Stonewall Jackson in the Bath Campaign. In February 1862 the regiment returned to Tennessee where it was split into

two wings. The wing in which Sam served was sent to Corinth and saw action at Shiloh and around Corinth. The 1st was heavily engaged at Perryville and at Murfreesboro. The winter of 1862-63 was spent near Shelbyville, but the army fell back to Chattanooga following the Tullahoma Campaign.

Sometime in late 1862 General Braxton Bragg authorized the organization of a company of 100 men whose duty was to penetrate US lines and collect information. These men would operate in uniform and would carry credentials from army headquarters identifying them as "scouts," but they would still run the danger of execution if caught. Captain B.H. Shaw was chosen to lead this unit, but he would always use the name of E. Coleman, and the unit would be known as Coleman's Scouts. The Scouts are mentioned in reports of the Battle of Stones River as having brought Bragg information of the US advance. It is not known just when Sam Davis joined the Scouts, but it is reasonable to assume that it was early in the history of that unit when the army was located in Middle Tennessee, an area Sam knew well and in which he had many friends and relations from whom he could collect information. We do know John Davis, Sam's older brother, was an original member of the company, and he helped select the other members.

Following the Battle of Chickamauga, the Scouts were tasked with



The Sam Davis homeplace near Smyrna, Tennessee.

moving into Middle Tennessee to determine if reinforcements were moving from Corinth, Mississippi, to assist the Union forces trapped in Chattanooga. The men followed what was called "the Scout's line" which ran through the mountains of North Alabama south of the Tennessee River, a no-man's land controlled by neither army, and then crossed into Middle Tennessee. Once the vicinity of the Tennessee River was reached, the men traveled alone or in groups of two or three.

Sam Davis moved into the area around Nashville, not far from his home at Smyrna, and visited his family and friends there for a few hours one night and then, after sleeping in the woods all day, made his way on towards Nashville. On the way he met two other Confederates, dressed in civilian clothes: Philip Matlock and James Castleman. The three caught a ride on a wagon going into town and were not questioned by the pickets. The three took a room at the

Saint Cloud Hotel on Church Street. They spent two days visiting friends, gathering news, and purchasing pistols from US soldiers who were willing to sell their side arms for as little as \$3. On the night following their second day they stole horses hitched outside the courthouse, and rode into the country, using side streets and cutting across vacant lots. The next morning, Sam Davis moved back toward LaVergne, Tennessee.

The attraction in that vicinity was the house of Mary Kate Patterson and her cousin, Robbie Woodruff. The Patterson house was used as a contact point by the Coleman Scouts since E.V. Patterson was a member of the unit. During the night Sam threw a gravel against the window of Mary Kate, who would later marry Sam's brother, and told her he was going to hole up in Rain's Woods for a few days. Rain's Woods was a 300-acre patch of dense undergrowth and cedars not far from the Patterson house. The next morning

the two young female cousins took Sam his breakfast, putting coffee in an earthen crock and wrapping it in a blanket to keep it warm. After a pleasant visit, during which all the military news the two had collected was passed on, Sam took his path further south.

About November 16 Sam was in the vicinity of Fayetteville, where he contacted Joel and Peter Cunningham, two local businessmen who had become guerrilla leaders. From them Sam gained more information and helped them chase a US patrol back into town after the Yankee soldiers had crossed the Elk River.

Moving carefully cross-country during the hours of darkness, Sam reached the vicinity of Pulaski where he knew the XVI Army Corps, commanded by General Grenville Dodge, had taken position. Robert English lived on Big Creek near Campbellsville in Giles County, not

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far from Pulaski, and he provided a "safe house" for couriers passing through the area. Robert's nephew, Polk English, was a member of the Coleman Scouts. Davis spent several days at the English home and in the vicinity of Pulaski, visiting contacts and collecting the information they had gathered. On November 19, 1863, he began his return trip to Confederate lines.

Not surprisingly, Sam was interested in finding company for the trip since a small party of two or three would be safer than a single person, and since the work of guarding against surprise in all directions could be shared. Riding down the Lamb's Ferry Road, near the community of Minor Hill, Sam was approached by two men wearing Confederate uniforms. One introduced himself as a recruiting officer, operating behind US lines for the purpose of rounding up men who had just become eligible for the draft as well as men who had recovered from wounds, those overstaying furloughs and deserters. This was a plausible story and the man sounded right; that is, his accent did not identify him as a Yankee. After a few minutes conversation both the men drew their weapons and ordered Sam to unbuckle his pistol belt. A signal brought out of hiding a patrol from the 7th Kansas Cavalry, the infamous *Jayhawker* regiment.

The captor of Sam Davis was Levi H. Naron, a South Carolina native who had moved to Mississippi several years prior to the war. Naron prospered as a plantation owner, but in 1861, he was a staunch Union man in his political views. This made him very unpopular with his neighbors and he was threatened with lynching if he did not keep quiet about his opinions. Naron became a refugee,

hiding in the woods and making his way north when he was apprehended and placed in jail in Corinth, Mississippi. He was released and ordered to return to his home, but instead made for Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, where the US army under Ulysses Grant had established their camp. Naron met Sherman and was employed as a scout, using the cover name of Captain Chickasaw. Eventually, Naron became Chief of Scouts for Dodge's XVI Corps.

Davis was taken to Pulaski and imprisoned in the town jail. He had a good deal of company since other scouts, couriers, and suspicious individuals had been apprehended in the vicinity. Davis immediately recognized one of the prisoners, his commanding officer who was thought by the US authorities to be an itinerant herb doctor. Davis felt it imperative to protect the identity of Shaw, or Coleman, as he was known.

A search of Davis' clothing, saddle bags and saddle discovered papers of military importance, including eleven newspapers with articles about troop movements, a complete description of the units comprising Dodge's XVI corps, and a map of the fortifications of Nashville. In addition, Davis was carrying some personal items intended for General Bragg, including soap, blank notebooks, and a toothbrush and a number of letters for men in the Confederate army. According to the testimony of US soldiers, given in evidence at the court martial which tried Davis, he was wearing a regular Confederate uniform and a US army issue overcoat from which the military buttons had been removed and which had been dyed black. Davis was taken from jail for an interview with General Dodge and was confronted with the papers which

had been found in his possession. General Dodge told Davis he was convinced Davis was a courier but that it was imperative he give the source of the information he was carrying. Davis replied that he knew he was in a dangerous situation, he understood his life was at risk, but he could not give up the name of his colleagues.

Since Davis had made no effort to conceal his identity but was wearing a Confederate uniform, there was an argument to be made that he could be treated as a prisoner of war, but the rules of war in effect at the time also provided that any person found behind the lines of the US army who was engaged in carrying information could be tried as a spy. Accordingly, on November 20, Dodge appointed a military commission to meet at Pulaski to try Davis. The members of the commission were Colonel Madison Miller, 18th Missouri; Lt. Colonel Thomas W. Gaines, 50th Missouri; Major Lathrop, 30th Ohio; Captain George Elliott, 39th Iowa; and Major N.B. Howard, 2nd Iowa, acted as judge advocate. Since this was a military commission, no officer was appointed to defend Davis.

When the commission met on November 24, two charges were brought against Davis. The first charge was he was a spy since he had come into the lines of the US army for the purpose of gaining information and conveying it into Confederate lines. The second charge was that Davis was a carrier of mail and other information from within US lines into Confederate territory. Davis pled *not guilty* to the first charge and *guilty* to the second.

The commission heard testimony from the men who had captured Davis, listened to a statement he

made, and then adjourned until the following day. On November 25, 1863, the commission ruled by unanimous vote that Davis was guilty on both charges and sentenced him to be hanged. General Dodge received and approved the findings of the commission and set the execution for November 27 between the hours of 10:00 A.M. and 2:00 P.M.

Chaplain James Young spent the intervening day with Davis and accompanied him to the scaffold. On November 26 Davis wrote a letter to his mother and entrusted it to Chaplain Young. The letter read

"Dear Mother; O how painful it is to write to 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-bye for evermore. Mother I do not fear to die. Give my love to all.

Your dear son.

Mother: Tell the children all to be good. I wish I could see all of you once more, but I never will anymore.

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, Tennessee. I will leave some things with the hotel keeper for you. Pulaski is in Giles County, Tennessee, south of Columbia."

On the morning of his execution Sam Davis ate his breakfast, sang his favorite hymn, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand*, with Chaplain Young, and calmly mounted a wagon where he sat on his coffin as he was escorted to the gallows. As the grim party waited for the final details to be taken care of, the man who had captured him rode up and offered Davis a final chance to save his life



Sam's hanging, in the collection is a nail from the scaffold, Sam's pocket watch and a button from his uniform taken from him before he was hung.

by revealing the name of his source of information. Davis replied, **"If I had a thousand lives I would lose them all before I would betray the trust of a friend or the confidence of an informer."** Just minutes later Sam Davis was dead.

The death of Davis made a lasting impression on those who witnessed it and many of them wrote accounts of the event following the war. The Nineteenth century was a time when death was faced more openly than is the case today. If one was to have "a good death" as the culture of the day defined it, certain things had to be done. The fact of ap-

proaching death had to be accepted calmly, the person must act in a courageous manner, and appropriate final words were to be spoken. The final words were thought to reveal the true character of the dying person. That is the reason the dying words of so many Nineteenth Century characters were carefully recorded and have been preserved for history. There was no possibility Davis could have prepared his final words in advance since he did not know he would be offered a last chance at a reprieve. Therefore, the

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Sam Davis' final resting place near the home he grew up in.

brave and dignified statement that he would die a thousand times rather than save himself by betraying another struck a resounding chord in the minds of those who heard them.

A few days following the execution a relative came to Pulaski to retrieve the body of Sam Davis. His remains were taken in a wagon to the family home in Smyrna and buried in the family cemetery. Some twenty years after the war, at his mother's

request, the body was moved to a plot in the backyard of the family home where it lies in honor today.

The story of Sam Davis did not become widely known until the mid-1880s when Sumner Cunningham, editor of the *Confederate Veteran*, was told of the events surrounding Davis' death. An article in the magazine touched off a flood of responses from former comrades who had known Davis, and a plan was set afoot to erect a monument to him. Economic conditions in the South made fulfillment of the plan a slow process. In 1906 a statue of Sam Davis was erected

on the courthouse square in Pulaski. The Tennessee legislature authorized a monument on the grounds of the state capitol and this was completed and dedicated in 1909. In the process of preparing these memorials it was discovered no picture of Sam Davis existed, so his brother posed for the sculptors. The United Daughters of the Confederacy placed a memorial window of Davis in the Confederate Memorial

Chapel in 1912, and the house where he grew up was acquired by the state in 1927 to become a living history memorial to the young man whose grave is in the rear of the house. History-minded citizens of Pulaski erected a shrine to Sam Davis in 1950 on the spot where he gave up his life.

November 2013 marks the sesquicentennial of the death of Sam Davis. The Sons of Confederate Veterans, and all who love courage, patriotism, and devotion to duty, should pause to do him honor.

Today the Sam Davis House is open to the public on a daily basis. The house was built in 1810 and the site includes outbuildings, including cabins of the slaves who worked here. Activities on the property portray the lifestyle of an upper middle-class family at the time of the War. The house contains many items which belonged to the Davis family, and a museum on the property houses the buttons from the uniform Sam was wearing at the time of his capture. The Sam Davis Memorial Association supports the house and its activities. Membership in the Association is open to all, and there are various levels at which one may donate to become a member. For more information on the Sam Davis home and membership in the association, go to www.samdavishome.org

Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp 33, Murfreesboro, is planning a three-day event, November 22, 23, 24, 2013, to commemorate the capture, trial and execution of Sam Davis. This event will include seminars, lectures, and a memorial service. All those who love the South and who wish to honor Sam Davis are invited to attend this event. For more details on this historic event, go to www.samdavis150.com. ❏