

Mosby's 1863 St. Patrick Day Raid on Herndon Station

By Chuck Mauro

On Sunday, March 17, Mosby's Raid on Herndon Station will be reenacted at 11 a.m and 2 p.m. The Herndon Historical Society and the Herndon Chamber of Commerce are sponsoring the event with support from the Town of Herndon.

On March 17, 1863, Saint Patrick's Day, Captain John S. Mosby made a raid on a Union outpost near one of his favorite targets, the Herndon train station on the Alexandria Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad. This raid also involved Kitty Kitchen Hanna, one very frightened resident in the village of Herndon.

A Union picket post had been deployed at a sawmill near the station at the intersection of today's Elden and Center Streets. The post consisted of 25 men under the command of Lieutenant Alexander G. Watson, Company L, of the First Vermont Cavalry.

At noon, Mosby approached the Herndon train station. He came out of the woods with 40 men who were wearing blue overcoats to cover their gray uniforms. Watson's men saw Mosby and his men coming, but—having been on duty for 48 hours—they thought they were a relief party. The Union soldiers did not realize their mistake until Mosby's men made their charge and quickly captured most of them, the rest electing to surrender.

As the Confederates were leaving the sawmill, they noticed four horses tied in front of Nathaniel (Nat) Hanna's residence. Hanna was a known Union man. (The house was located where the Main Street Bank stands today, at 727 Elden Street.) The horses belonged to Major William Wells, Captain Robert Schofield, Lieutenant Perley C. J. Cheney, and Lieutenant Watson. Wells, Schofield, and Cheney, also of the First Vermont Cavalry, had ridden to the station to investigate complaints from the local civilians of looting by the local Union soldiers.

The four officers were inside eating a meal provided by Nat Hanna's wife, Kitty Kitchen Hanna, who unlike her husband was a loyal southerner, when they noticed Mosby's men in front of the residence. Cheney and Watson rushed out and were captured. Wells and Schofield tried to hide in the attic. One of Mosby's rangers fired a shot through the ceiling calling for their surrender. This caused Major Wells to fall through the ceiling, directly into the hands of the captors. After the war, it is believed that Wells or Schofield returned to reclaim their guns, which they had left hidden in the walls. Incidentally, Major Wells would later be promoted to brigadier general.

Kitty Kitchen Hanna later recounted the terrifying story of what happened inside her house that day. It began earlier, when her husband told her that they would be having a guest for dinner. Lieutenant Watson came to the house and was later joined by the three other officers. She sent for two pies from her aunt's house to feed her larger than expected number of guests. Her account of what happened next is as follows:

Never shall I forget that Saint Patrick's Day, March 17, 1863—or them pies. As I turned from servin' the pies, I cast my eyes out'n the window...an' I saw comin' a squad of grays! The rebel yell was no louder than my scream, "the Southern!" as they came tearin' down the hill, an' every man at the table ran to front door—the wors' thing to do, to show theyselves! — an' then the bullets jes' rained on our house. The Yankees ran

inside an' I thought they was goin' to fight it out, but though they buckled on sabres, they followed my brother-in-law up the stairway, till I cried out in terror—

“Gentlemen, go outside, or I’ll be murdered in my own house!” Watson couldn’t stand that, so he rushed out, firin’ all the time, an so did Lieutenant Chiny; an I never saw either one on’em again, but I knew they’d been caught. Watson was a Vermonter, who was never more seen in these parts. The other two officers followed my brother-in-law to the garret, which was floored all over an’ had a big brick chimney runnin’ through the roof; an’ behin’ that chimney was a dark cuddy protected by a closet on one side, with only three boards for floorin.’ The three men crawled in there, an’ while they was hidin,’ Mother an’ me ran over to Betsy Allen’s... I looked down toward mill an’ saw the line of boys in blue standin’ with their sabres up, an’ I felt sure they would all be kilt, so I turned my back not to see it...leavin’ those men hidin’ in the attic. We could hear the Southern’s rush in the house shootin’ and bangin,’ an’ I felt certain no one would be lef’ alive. What did happen, my brother-in-law told me afterwards. Mosby’s men rushed upstairs callin’ them to surrender, which as the bullets whizzed ‘round, they decided to do, an’ they was taken prisoners of war. Nat’s brother was lef’ there, he not bein’ in army, an’ also known to Mosby’s men, who took off with the Yankee officers an’ the beautiful horses to someplace beyond the Union lines...

I went creepin’ home, expectin’ to see dead men at every step, but I found none...

Some of the Vermont men did escape. One started back to Dranesville for help. Lieutenant Edwin H. Higley, also of the First Vermont Cavalry, hearing the gunfire hurried toward the station. He met the one Vermonter to escape two miles back toward Dranesville. Higley gave chase to Mosby as far as Horsepen Run southwest of the station. Here, some of Mosby’s men opened fire and Higley retreated. Union outposts at Herndon Station and Dranesville were subsequently moved across Difficult Run closer to Fairfax Court House.

Within a couple of weeks, Mosby’s men rode by again, stopping at the Herndon Station across the street from Kitty’s house:

They halted at the depot, but the leader rode into our yard an’ lef’ his horse standin,’ an’ knocked at the front door.

“Madam,” he says, “I come to apologize to you for my men shootin’ at your house a week or so back.”

“So they did,” I replied, but said no more.

“Can you let me have a newspaper to read, Madam?” (There was a pile inside but I answered,) “No, sir, I can’t.”

Mosby was too polite to insist, an’ he turned an’ walked away. I never saw him after, but in his book he called me a ‘Union woman’; he little knew how my heart was torn to pieces. I wished harm to nobody, an’ cared for many a soldier, Northern an’ Southern alike. I grew nervous seein’ scouts at all hours, an’ soldiers rushin’ by with bayonets pointed at my home. But I let that pass, an’ bygones be bygones...

This column is excerpted from *A Tour Guide and History of Col. John S. Mosby's Operations in Fairfax County, Virginia*, by Don Hakenson and Chuck Mauro. It is available from www.hmshistory.com. The Kitty Kitchen Hanna narrative was originally published in *Reminiscences of an Oldest Inhabitant (A Nineteenth Century Chronicle)*, by Virginia Carter Castleman. It is available in the Depot Museum.