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**The Baltzell-Brantley Feud in Texas and
Mississippi: The Murders of John, Arnold,
and William Brantley, 1859-1870**

BY WHITNEY SNOW

A feud spanning the states of Texas and Mississippi started when William Baltzell whipped a slave belonging to John Brantley in Gonzales. When John sought satisfaction for the assault, he wound up dead and more murders ensued. Over the course of eleven years, his brothers Arnold and Confederate General William met with an assassin's bullet. Both the Baltzell and Brantley factions sought righteousness, a justice that never came because the feud was one of futility.

Historians have long explored the roots of feuds as reflecting far more than animosity. Indeed, many quarrels stemmed from cultural, ethnic, racial, or economic causes and or Civil War affiliation. The word feud often evokes the Hatfield-McCoy conflict but many squabbles of equal ferocity took place all over the country, especially in Texas. Whereas the Hoo Doo War, Sutton-Taylor Feud, and Lee-Peacock Feud became renowned in the state, others like the Baltzell-Brantley feud received little attention, perhaps because much of the killing took place in Mississippi.¹ This feud warrants study not merely because one victim happened to be famous, but because its beginning likely had an economic basis.

John, Arnold, and William were born to William and Marina Brantley in Greene County, Alabama. Father William originally came from Edgecombe County, North Carolina, and had lived in Hancock County, Georgia, before moving to Alabama. He and his wife had the following children: Edmund (1822); John Ransom (1824); Albert (1826); Missouri (1828); William (1830); and Arnold (1832). When William died in 1839, the family moved to Choctaw County, Mississippi.² William and Arnold pursued law and remained in Mississippi while John became a doctor and moved to Texas in the mid-1850s. Had John known then what this transition would mean for his family, he never would have gone west of the Mississippi River.

John Ransom settled in Gonzales, Texas, with his wife Rebecca and their daughters Missouri and Alice.³ In addition to practicing medicine, he dabbled in merchandise and this may well have instigated the feud

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which began in 1857. His foray into goods may have irked local general store owners John, Barney, and William Munroe as well as their clerks David and William Baltzell. One day, one of the Baltzell brothers lashed John Ransom's slave Buford. The *Memphis Avalanche* reported that Bufe was a "smart nigger, although a grand rascal" but no one knew what he had done to earn the wrath of the Baltzells.⁴ When Buford informed his master what had happened, John Ransom was livid and sought vengeance.

On February 26, 1859, John Ransom confronted the Baltzells and the verbal argument quickly turned bloody. Rumor had it that he tried to stab William, was shot by David, and succumbed from the wound.⁵ Local authorities arrested David but the Munroes bailed him out of jail and he was never brought to trial. The people of Gonzales quickly took sides and most came to the defense of the Baltzells, likely for three main reasons.⁶ For one thing, even though John Ransom was well liked, he had only been in town a few years and was still viewed as an outsider. For another, many likely thought he had been foolhardy in his quest to avenge a slave. Another possibility may be that they thought John Ransom posed a threat to the Munroe brother's trade. The murder made newspaper headlines nationwide and when word reached J.R.'s relatives in Mississippi, all hell broke loose.

After the murder, Rebecca and the girls, no doubt heartbroken, moved back to Choctaw County.⁷ When the extended Brantley family learned that John Ransom had been killed, members were angry. Seeking justice, the family sent "a noted desperado," to Gonzales to find out exactly what happened.⁸ The feud soon intensified.

On August 16, 1859, Neil McCoy, whom witnesses described as a "professional gambler and outlaw," attacked William Baltzell and killed David Baltzell. Much like John Ransom's demise, this murder appeared in papers throughout the country. One article in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* stated that even though the bullet hit David in the side of the head and lodged in his forehead, he lived for about half an hour.⁹ McCoy disappeared after the fact, and a mob failed to find his trail.¹⁰ Later that month, however, the *San Antonio Ledger* and *Texas* reported that McCoy had sent an appeal "in refutation of the charges made against him" and that "he says he is ready to meet any charge."¹¹

In 1860, McCoy was indicted for the murder of David and many witnesses gave their version of what happened to authorities. About 45 minutes before the scuffle, McCoy was playing pool at a home connected

to the local hotel, the Keyser House. When he finished his game, he walked outside and began chatting with about fifteen men. He let it be known that he had arrived the day before and planned on leaving the following day. He explained that if he ran into the Munroes, he would "spit in their damn faces, and then they could murder him as they had his friend Dr. Brantley."¹² One eye witness said McCoy claimed, "The Munroes were damned cowards and damned murderers, that he could whip any of them; that they and the Baltzells had murdered his friend; and that he would rather lie in Brantley's grave than to speak to them."¹³ After this rant, he told listeners to inform the brothers of his presence. When they heard the news, the Baltzell brothers responded in very different ways.

When friends told them of the threat, William exhibited nonchalance while David expressed apprehension. A man named Logan invited both to dine with him at the Keyser house but only William accepted. David decided to stay at home where he armed himself with a shotgun and prepared for the worst. In the meantime, when William and Logan approached the hotel, they saw several men: Hardy, Gibson, Blakely, McCoy, and a man identified only as "Brantley."¹⁴ As William and Logan walked in, Brantley motioned to McCoy as if to affirm their identity. Wanting to be positive of which man was, in fact, a Baltzell, McCoy asked the other men but they refused to answer. Frustrated, McCoy took Brantley into the hotel office to confer. While they conversed, William and Logan sat down to eat.¹⁵

For William, the evening promised to be a much needed respite. After all, ever since John Ransom's murder, William and his brother had tried to keep out of sight and rarely went out. Because he did not know what McCoy looked like, he probably had not paid much attention to the stranger outside. Plus, Logan had been drinking and William wanted to imbibe as well. They pretty much had the place all to themselves because the only others inside were the landlord, landlady, and one other customer.¹⁶ Relaxing and talking with Logan, William had no clue what was about to transpire.

By that time, McCoy and Brantley had exited the building and once more, lurked outside the door. One of the men present, William Laird, saw trouble brewing and tried to prevent it by asking McCoy to join him for a smoke. Laird later testified that McCoy refused his offer in an extremely rude way. Insulted, Laird turned to walk away and came face to face with David, shot-gun in hand. David, no doubt worried about William, had decided to face McCoy but Laird warned him that bloodshed was likely. Before David had time to address McCoy, a voice

rang out from the door of the hotel.¹⁷

Hearing the ruckus, William had left his table and gone to the door where he asked, "Mr. McCoy?"¹⁸ David all but leapt to William's side in an attempt to deter McCoy from hurting his brother. Ignoring the display of filial loyalty, McCoy answered, "This is Mr. Baltzell is it?"¹⁹ Hesitantly, William said yes. Obviously unsure of which brother he was addressing, McCoy took several steps and asked, "Billy Baltzell?"²⁰ Laird later stated that at that moment, McCoy raised his hand as if he intended to punch William. In self-defense mode, William proceeded to answer while grabbing for his gun. He never managed to utter a reply because what happened next left a man dead.²¹

"Don't you speak to me you damn murderer," McCoy screamed. Laird said that at that moment, McCoy, William, and David fired their weapons and then McCoy managed to knock William out by hitting him with a slung shot. However, William's "cap exploded without firing, and none of the loads of his pistol were discharged."²² Some standers-by dragged William into the hotel while others ran for cover so none claim to have seen the coming murder.

Once the gunfire ceased, the townspeople peeked out the windows and slowly made their way onto the street where David lay. David had been shot in the left temple but the bullet had not exited his head. Instead, it lodged in his forehead and made for a gruesome sight. Amazingly enough, locals detected a weak pulse and while his breathing was shallow, David managed to live for another thirty minutes before passing away. When William came to, he mourned his brother and was irate because McCoy had vanished.²³

While some saw the killing of David retribution for the murder of Dr. Brantley, others disagreed. Austin's *State Gazette* inferred that Brantley's murder was justified. In essence, because Brantley had been in the process of knifing David, the paper said William shot him in self-defense. It added that David "was highly esteemed by all who knew him, and was followed to his last resting place by a concourse of citizens, who seemed deeply afflicted at the irreplaceable loss."²⁴ Eventually, McCoy was apprehended but denied bail because "the killing was upon express malice."²⁵ His trial took place in 1860 but the blood feud continued.²⁶ The Munroe brothers, especially, blamed the Brantley's for David's death and vowed to get even. In Choctaw County, a man named Davis, a friend of the Brantleys, was hit in the side with buck-shot but survived. Back in Gonzales, William kept himself armed at every waking hour

because he lived in constant dread of being killed. This must have taken a toll on his nerves because he turned to alcohol and became a drunk.²⁷ The Civil War temporarily sidetracked the feud participants but not for long, and another Brantley brother paid the ultimate price.

Unlike John, Arnold remained in Choctaw County, married a woman named Lucy, had four children: Laura, Clayton, Ella, and Hattie.²⁸ He practiced law until the Civil War when he operated as a "secret agent for the Confederate government" in Jackson.²⁹ It was there, in 1863, that Arnold murdered a planter named Green at the city's Bowman House. No charges were filed but accounts differed as to motive. Some speculated that he and Green argued over gambling but others thought it feud related.³⁰

A Works Progress Administration history of Webster County, Mississippi, briefly mentioned this particular murder. It claimed that Green expressed glee over John Ransom's death and admitted as much to Arnold. He supposedly said that for a quarter, he would just as soon see Arnold under the ground. Arnold did not have a gun on him and Green warned that in the future, arming himself might be wise. When the exchange ended, Arnold stormed off, procured a gun, and returned to the Bowman House shouting, "I am Arnold Brantley, brother of Dr. Brantley who was murdered by the Baltzell brothers, and whose murder you endorsed; you would kill me for twenty-five cents, by God I'll kill you for nothing."³¹ With that, Arnold fired a bullet into Green's head, killing him instantly. Arnold walked away a free man and after the war, returned to Choctaw County, and then moved to nearby Winona, Montgomery County.

In 1870, Arnold, by then mayor of the city, likely never imagined that he, too, would fall victim to the feud. On August 16, an unknown assassin fired a shotgun through a window at the Winona Opera House. The flurry of buckshot killed Arnold and injured a woman sitting close-by. At the time, the community did not know who killed their mayor but many thought it had something to do with Texans. The WPA History of Webster County mentioned that the "Ringer brothers were credited with this murder" but no charges were ever filed.³² Whatever the case, two Brantley brothers lay buried and the question remained—which of the remaining brothers was next?

William had perhaps the most eventful life of the Brantley siblings. In 1850, he lived with John but in 1952, he started practicing law. Three years later, William married a woman named Cornelia and had two

children, Mary and Joseph.³³ While hardly a fan of politics, he served in the Secession Convention in 1861 and went on to have an impressive military career. He started as Captain of the 15th Mississippi Regiment, and after showing valiance and leadership in battles like Shiloh, Murfreesboro, and Chickamauga, became a Brigadier General, possibly the youngest one in the Confederacy.³⁴ At war's end, peace provided little solace for Brantley for Cornelia had died in 1863 so he returned home a widower. In 1867, he married Julia Cunningham and the two had a baby which died shortly after birth. Two years later, his ten-year-old son died, adding yet another sorrow.³⁵

William had been livid when John had been killed but Arnold's murder cut him to the core. After the mayor's death, William and his law partner J.Z. George made it a personal mission to find the murderer. All the while, William kept receiving threats that he, too, might share the same fate unless he ceased snooping.³⁶ Sure enough, on November 2, 1870, while on a road near Winona, William was shot with "twenty-five buckshot" and died.³⁷ Various accounts claim that he was in a wagon when shot but the *Semi-Weekly Clarion* held that he had been on horseback. The paper asked, "Who were the authors of this dark deed?"³⁸

No one knew for sure but while a respected war hero, Brantley's notorious temper coupled with stubbornness had earned many enemies.³⁹ According to one account, "Not a few of his men, and even officers, looked upon him as a martinet, unduly acting, and at times unnecessarily severe in his discipline."⁴⁰ The *Semi-Weekly Clarion*, however, connected his death to Arnold's murder:

He seems himself to have considered it not unlikely that the efforts he felt called on to make the apprehension and punishment of his brother's murderers, might result in the sacrifice of his own life, but it was a principle with him never to deviate from his course through fear of his enemies; and but a short time before his death, when warned by a friend that there was danger to be apprehended at their hand if he should travel the usual route in a journey which he contemplated, his characteristic reply was—Whenever it is so that I cannot go wherever my business calls me, then I want them to kill me.⁴¹

William had refused to live in fear and instead, had tried to live

life as usual, dangers aside. He was laid to rest in the Old Greensboro Cemetery but if locals thought the feud had ended, they had made a serious mistake.

Later that year, the feud claimed yet another victim—Thomas P. Conner, a cousin of the Brantleys. A Mississippi legislator, Conner had been shot in Winona. Authorities suspected a man by the name of Collins but had no real proof. The *Albany Evening Journal* reported that the murder had stemmed from that of Arnold's.⁴² After this death, however, the feud seemed to fade away but it had certainly taken its toll on the Brantley family.

By 1871, only two of the original six Brantley siblings remained. Four had died gory deaths. Edmund had been killed in a duel in 1850 while John, Arnold, and William had been murdered, likely all at the hands of feud participants.⁴³ Missouri had stayed in Choctaw County, married Josiah Dunn, and had a family. In 1872, a man named Story killed her son William but this may or may not have been related to the feud.⁴⁴ The only brother left, Albert worked as a district attorney in Choctaw County and had sons Ransom and William with his wife Mary.⁴⁵ These survivors no doubt struggled to find normalcy after so many years of turmoil.

The feud largely decimated the Brantley family. Three brothers and possibly a cousin and nephew lost their lives because of the squabble. Authorities never prosecuted anyone for the murders of Arnold and William. Peace eluded the Brantleys while the remaining Baltzell brother drank himself into oblivion. If anyone could remotely claim victory, it had to be the Munroe brothers who had rid themselves of whatever competition John Ransom might have posed and rather successfully taken up the gauntlet to avenge David. Memory of the Baltzell-Brantley Feud dwindled over the following decades but its tale of blood, honor, and reckoning remains a vivid, if often overlooked chapter, in both Texas and Mississippi history.

ENDNOTES

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