



SHOOTOUT ON THE STREETS OF ROCKTOWN

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by Peggy Smith Hake

She is an average, small American town, quietly progressing through the late 20th century. Iberia, once called Rocktown, sits upon the rolling hills of southern Miller County trying to project the image that her streets, businesses, and citizens are cast in a mold of peaceful contentment in this age of modern technology! There are ghosts from the past under that peaceful facade, my friends. Those haunting ghosts are riding roughshod over my mind as I write this story...the blacksmith's white-hot forge steaming; saloon doors swinging; horse hooves echoing over the dirt streets of the town; fists flying; blazing guns ...that was the scenerio of peaceful Rocktown-Iberia on Christmas Day, 1865.

The Civil War had officially ended only a few months earlier, but in Miller County the hatreds were still raging fiercely across our countryside. Neighbors suspected each other of supporting the opposite side of the war faction. An oldtimer once said, "Miller County was the roughest place on earth." He was referring to the fighting, suspicions, hatreds, and bushwhacking that continued on for more than a decade after the close of the war. The old saying "sleeping dogs would not lie" described the situation perfectly.

For some reason, which I haven't been able to determine, a group of Southern sympathizers spent much of their time and energy harassing the Long family of southern Richwoods township. They certainly were not the only family in the Big Richwoods who favored the Northern ideology of that day. Even more confusing is the fact that the Long family immigrated from the southern states and owned slaves. They lived in the vicinity of the Madden-Pleasant Hill community and some of their neighbors were the Maddens with whom they fought on Christmas Day, 1865 on the streets of Iberia.

During the Civil War, a Union fort was built in Iberia and was under the command of Capt. William Long, son of James and Harriett Long. This old fort

stood where the Farnham and Sons Lumber Co. once existed in the 1940's and 50's when I was a child growing up in Iberia. Capt. Long was killed during the Civil War at his parents' farm home a few miles southwest of Iberia. While visiting his family, a group of bushwhackers rode up to the Long homestead and ordered Capt. Long outside. He helped his father, mother, and old slave gentleman to escape from these marauders, but they set the house afire and as Capt. Long fled from the flames, he was gunned down in the yard, and killed instantly. Perhaps this was the beginning of the harassment of the Long family endured over the next few years.

Christmas Day, 1865, while families should have been together celebrating the birth of their Lord, blood was spilled on the streets of Rocktown-Iberia. Over one of the southern hills surrounding the town, horse hooves were echoing on the cold ground as several men rode into town with guns on their hips and fire in their eyes. They were shouting, "Death to all the Longs and their friends." According to old court records, eye witnesses related what they saw and heard during this day of tragedy. Trouble did not begin on Christmas Day, but earlier before the Christmas holiday. William Harrison Smith stated he had been at a "house raising" at Mr. and Mrs. Stone's (John B. & Samantha Bailey Stone) in the Big Richwoods, northwest of Iberia one evening. About 10 o'clock that night, Anderson Chappel, Ruel Elsey, and several other men rode up on their horses. There was a lively party going on because the work was finished and the folks were having a dance to celebrate the "house raising." Ruel Elsey sent word into the house for the Long boys to send their slave outside to fight him, but the Longs went out instead and gun shots rang out. One of the men who was shot that night was a son of William H. Melton who lived over near the Pulaski County line. William rode out the next day to get this son to haul him home and he enlisted the aid of the

Maddens to help him. I am presuming that the Melton boy was killed. That fight set the stage for the Christmas Day shoot-out in Rocktown!

When the crowd of gunmen rode into Iberia on Christmas Day, John Arnold was at Thompson's blacksmith shop. William Madden came there with Ruel Elsey and several other men. Elsey took a gun from George Long and abused him somewhat. Joshua Cochran said that he was talking to George Long when 15 or 16 men came riding up. George Long was asked by Elsey where young Johnnie Long was, but George did not know. George had told Joshua Cochran that he feared of being killed.

William Harrison Smith was in Rocktown on Christmas Day when Madden and the others rode into town. Julius Bailey cornered Smith and told him to steer clear of the group because they considered him a friend to the Longs. Bailey suggested he stay out of the way. Smith said, "A few days before, some of the Longs told me they were afraid in Rocktown." Evidently he was one of their comrades from the war. Smith was a former Union soldier. (He was my great grandfather, born in Pulaski County in 1841 to John Wesley Smith and his wife, the former Nancy Stinnett of Tennessee.)

Francis M. Elsey (Bud) owned a grocery and saloon in Rocktown and it stood at the corner of Main and St. Louis streets (site of the Roy Porter Store in days of my childhood). Evidently several men had spent the better part of the day in and around the saloon. Had word gotten out that today was the day of reckoning? Were old scores ready to be settled? The Smith boys, George and James, had tried to raise a fuss with Mr. McMillen all day, but each time they managed to get it quietly settled. They also had tried to pick fights with Bud Elsey. Peter Mashburn was with the Smith boys and he was in the thick of it, too.

William Madden was among the riders who had come to town and was inside Elsey's store talking with Elsey. He opened the

front door to leave and George Smith said something to him. Madden replied, "I want no fuss," but words continued between them. One called the other a cowardly rascal and the other yelled "you're a no good Rebel." The Smith boys threw off their coats and rushed toward Madden who had been joined by Anderson Chappel. They yelled... "Go bold face against the world!" They began a fight which became vicious and finally ended in a cloud of smoke as a revolver was fired. James Smith fell dead. Francis (Bud) Elsey had run from his store to his home nearby and got his revolver. Albina Elsey, his wife, had run out in the yard beside him to see what was happening. All of a sudden, Elsey jumped over his fence and fired his gun, killing James Smith instantly on the street. Albina Elsey had a gun also and she fired it at George Smith. He fell, almost instantly, dead as well. She turned and ran back toward her house but was shot as she tried to get to safety. She fell through her front door. In the meantime James Runnels had shot Francis Elsey, her husband. Four or five men began chasing Thomas and Calvin Elsey through the field toward Mooreland's stable. Evidently they made it safely to the stable. Back at Francis Elsey's home, his sister, Polly Ann Elsey, had a revolver when she appeared at the front door and she fired into the crowd of men outside. They scattered in all directions, but the same man who had shot Albina, her sister-in-law, also shot Polly Ann. Her sister, Louisa (Elsey) Shelton, saw what happened and she started to run to her sister, but the man told her to go back, "or I'll shoot you, too." In the meantime, Peter Mashburn and James Runnels carried 'Bud' Elsey in from the field where he had been shot down and threw him over the yard fence. Elsey was not dead and begged to be carried in the house, but some of the men told him to just lay outside with the other dead men in the street. Albina, his wife, was mortally wounded but did not die at the scene. Someone carried her to her Uncle Isaac Crismon's

farm in Maries County and she died there. There is record that her young brother, Bob Page, age about 16 years, was sent back to Iberia to get medical help for her, but he was gunned down and killed also. Back at the horrendous scene of murder and mayhem, the bodies of the two Smith brothers were carried from the public road to the home of Thomas and Caroline (Rowden) Hickman in Rocktown.

As the sun set over the western horizon on Christmas Day, 1865, Rocktown was in a shambles. Three men and one woman lay dead; a woman and another man were severely wounded; and a few days earlier another man evidently had been killed in a feud-type argument that continued through Christmas Day.

I have tried to research the various families involved in this story and found some interesting data....

The Long family, who became the target of southern sympathizers, came from eastern Tennessee quite a number of years prior to the Civil War. The family was originally from Culpepper Co., Virginia and had migrated into eastern Tennessee and moved on west into Missouri in the late 1830's and 40's. There were several families in the Long clan and each had numerous children. Their allied families were the Stewarts and Castlemans who also settled the Big Richwoods. They were a close-knit, early American family.

The Elsey family came from DeKalb Co., Ala. in the 1840's and first settled in Maries County (then Osage Co.) near Mrs. Elsey's family, the Rowdens. John Elsey married Rachel Rowden, daughter of Asa and Margaret (Hannah) Rowden in DeKalb Co., Ala. in 1839. Her family originated in Henry Co., Virginia; moved to eastern Tennessee where she was born; and then moved to DeKalb Co., Ala. where she met and married John. John and Rachel Elsey had a large family of 13 children. Between 1850 and 1860, they moved from Maries-Osage Co. to

southeastern Richwoods township and settled on a prairie which later was called Elsey's Prairie. During the Civil War, a battle was fought on their prairie and it was called, "The Elsey Farm Fight." My great-great grandfather, Levi Whittle, a Union soldier, was killed in that fight and buried near the battleground. Francis M. (Bud) Elsey was their oldest son who married Albina Page in Miller County in 1861. Their oldest daughter, Louisa Jane Elsey, married a Shelton, and Polly Ann Elsey, another daughter, was not married in 1865 when the fight occurred. All three Elsey children named were involved in the shoot-out at Rocktown plus some of their other children as well including Ruel, Thomas, and Calvin. Rachel Rowden Elsey's cousin, Caroline Rowden Hickman, daughter of Nathaniel Rowden, and her husband, Thomas Hickman, were also involved in the fighting and it was to their home the bodies of the slain Smith boys were carried. The Elsey family left Miller County and moved to Franklin Co., Arkansas in the years following.

Francis (Bud) Elsey survived his gunshot wounds. He left Miller County with some of his brothers soon after the Christmas Day fight in Rocktown. He went to Franklin County, Arkansas and married his second wife, an Arkansas girl named Mollie Berry. Calvin Elsey, Bud's brother, married Callie Painter in Franklin County, Arkansas. By 1871, most of the Elsey family were gone from Miller County.

