

Stryker's William J. Knight Tells Story Of Andrews Raid



Andrews! Raiders met after dark south of Shelbyville before embarking on their exciting Civil War adventure. (Capturing a Locomotive)

Editor's Note: One of the most interesting episodes in American history involved a man who later made Williams County his permanent home. William J. Knight of Stryker was a participant in the famous Andrews Raid during the Civil War for which he received a Congressional Medal of Honor.

In the March 1911 issue of The Railroad Man's Magazine, Mr. Knight told the story of the Andrews Raid in his own words. This story was reprinted in the March 9, 1911 Montpelier Enterprise, and will be reprinted over the next several months in the Northwest Historian.

Although Knight often spoke after the war about his adventure, this is the only known written account he made of the raid.

The much mooted question as to whether the plucky little locomotive which now stands in the Union Station at Chattanooga, Tenn., a relic of the Civil War, was ever known by any name other than that of "General" is finally settled herewith.

The last word comes from Mr. William J. Knight, the engineer who actually held the throttle of the pursued locomotive during the wildest and most important race ever run on wheels. Mr. Knight is one of the few surviving veterans who took part in the Andrews Raid into the Confederate lines. He has given us a railroad man's version of the famous run, which we hope will clear up any doubts, which may have been previously held by our readers.

In a personal letter to the editor of *The Railroad Man's Magazine*, Mr. Knight states positively that the engine he ran over the rails of the Western and Atlantic Railroad from Big Shanty to Ringgold bore the name of "General," and that any other name which has since been applied to it is erroneous.

The raiders anticipated Sherman by two whole years. Had they been successful, the March to the Sea might never have taken place. But they failed, and many of them paid the penalty of their daring with their *lives-Editorial from the March number of The Railroad Man's Magazine.*

I well remember that day in April 1862 when I first learned that I was to figure in an expedition to capture a Confederate railroad train-an expedition, which has since gone down in history as the most thrilling succession of events that ever occurred on rails of steel.

It was after dinner during dress parade when our colonel, after a word with Capt. L.E. Brewster, stepped up in full view of us and said in a tone of command: "If there is any man in Company E who knows how to handle a locomotive, let him step one pace to the front."

Thinking at the same time that some interesting work might be in store for me, I stepped forward, and on being told to report at headquarters immediately after my dismissal by the captain, I resumed my position in the ranks until drill was over.

I was then a private in Company E of the 21st Ohio Infantry, which along with the 33rd and 2nd Ohio regiments had encamped at Shelbyville, Tenn., as I was soon to learn, for the purpose of sending a secret expedition through the enemy's lines to tear up the track and destroy bridges on the Atlantic Railroad between Chattanooga, Tenn., and Atlanta, Ga.

Most of the recruits and supplies for the western wing of the Confederate army were transported from Atlanta to Chattanooga over this line and therefore it was the object of the Federal leader to cripple it and tie up all traffic as soon as possible.

At the colonel's headquarters, where I hurried with Captain Brewster as soon as dress parade was over, I was introduced to James J. Andrews, a Kentucky scout, who at once unfolded to me his daring plan to capture a train at Big Shanty and run for the Union lines, leaving a trail of blazing bridges behind him. Off for Big Shanty

As we stood studying the map, the scheme looked plausible enough. I readily volunteered to go and take my chances with the rest of the boys who had signed up. I was told to put on citizen's clothing, with which I was provided, and be prepared to meet Andrews and his party just after dark at a point south of Shelbyville.

I did as directed. That night 22 of us, in small parties, set out for Chattanooga in the rain. We got through the Confederate lines easily enough by telling the pickets we were from Kentucky on our way south to join the Confederate army; and arriving in Chattanooga three days later, we boarded a train for Marietta, journeying southward over the road we were planning to cripple.

We still traveled singly or in groups of two or three, pretending not to know one another as the cars we rode in were full of Confederate soldiers whose suspicions might have been easily aroused had we appeared to be too well acquainted.

The way they talked about being ready to eat up every "Yank" in the Union made it hard for us to keep from starting a free-for-all fight then and there; but we bided our time, and when we passed Big Shanty, where we were later to capture our train, more than one of us turned to pass the wink to his neighbor.

We stayed at Marietta that night, and at five o'clock the next morning, which as I remember it was April 12, 1862, we boarded a northbound train for Big Shanty. We traveled in little groups, studiously avoiding each other though we knew that our time of secrecy was close to an end.

I sat with several companions near the front of the car next to the engine, and on looking around saw that the other members of our party had all taken seats behind me. It was not an easy matter to appear unconcerned, knowing that in a few minutes we might be called upon to battle for our lives against heavy odds, for we all felt that if caught we would be treated as spies and hanged without mercy.

"Big Shanty! Twenty minutes for breakfast!" finally came Conductor Fuller's call, and the train soon slowed down and stopped before a little one-story station that served as a ticket office and eating house for the trainmen and passengers.

The moment had arrived for us to put our daring plan into execution. I say daring, feeling that I am not overstepping the bounds of modesty, for at that time there were Confederate troops camped close to the station and picket lines enclosed us on every side.

Our party filed out of the car with the rest of the passengers, but by a preconcerted plan, Andrews and I alighted on the opposite side of the train and made our way toward the engine, keeping out of sight as much as possible.

By the time we had reached the cab we found that the engineer and fireman had both gone to their breakfast.

Making a Getaway

"We're lucky they didn't stop to shake down their fire and oil around," said Andrews as we crouched beside the tender.

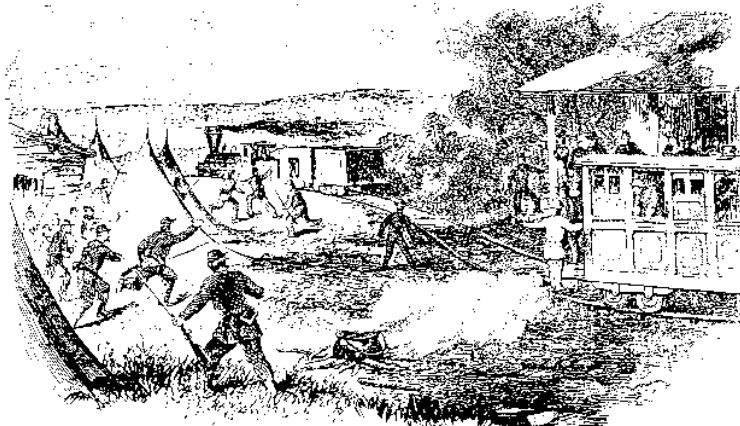
"It looks as if we can get away without firing a shot. You run back and uncouple these forward box cars from the rest of the train, and we'll pull out immediately. We can make better time without the other cars and the men can keep out of sight in them when we run through stations."

I hastened to obey and going back pulled the pin between the third and fourth cars so that when we pulled out we would leave the heavy baggage and passenger coaches standing on the track. A sentry was pacing up and down the platform within ten feet of where I stood, but I managed to dodge behind the cars and get back to where Andrews was waiting without his seeing me.

By this time our little party had collected near the open end of one of the box cars. At a nod from Andrews, who now leaped aboard the engine, I followed while John and Alf Wilson, who was to serve as fireman, and W. W. Brown, my assistant, swung on from the opposite side.

The gauge showed plenty of pressure, and a white feather was going up from the steam dome.

"Into your car men, quick!" called Andrews. "Let her go Knight!"



After disconnecting some cars from the train at Big Shanty, Andrews' Raiders set off on the "Great Locomotive Chase." (Daring and Suffering)

The Throttle Open

I jerked open the throttle. We leaped ahead like a shot. Looking back, I could see the last man of our party being hauled head-first into a freight car while out of the station poured a stream of passengers and trainmen, shouting and waving their arms in a wild state of excitement.

We soon disappeared from their sight around a curve and ran down the track a couple of miles. Spying a crowd of section men at work ahead of us. Andrews called out to me: "Stop just this side of those fellows! We'll get their tools and tear up the track while Scott cuts the wires!"

Andrews had no fear of a message being sent on ahead from Big Shanty to intercept us as there was no operator there; but feeling that a message might already be speeding back to Marietta-the nearest telegraph office-Andrews thought it wise to be on the safe side.

When we came to a standstill, Andrews went ahead to where the gang was working and ordered them to turn over their tools. I could see that there was some argument at first, but they finally did as directed without any show of resistance, though they were probably greatly puzzled at his command.

After a stop of several minutes, during which the wires were cut and a rail taken up, we started on again. We were considerably ahead of the regular schedule time, so in order to pass a train at Kingston which we knew was coming our way, we slowed down somewhat; but whenever we came in sight of a station, I would pull her wide open and go through like the wind.

It was amusing to see the amazed looks on the faces of the passengers who stood with their grips in hand waiting to board our train when we shot by at lightning speed.

Andrews had planned to bum the bridge over the Etowa River, but fearing that we had stopped too long already, we crossed it and sped on through Etowa, where we passed a locomotive standing under full steam on a branch line that ran to an iron mine. I suggested to Andrews that we had better stop and disable this engine in case we were pursued, but he refused to do so. It was there that we made our worst mistake, for had we carried away some part of the mechanism of the old "Yonah," Conductor W.A. Fuller and his party could never have followed us as closely as they did.

Andrews, unfortunately, did not know that on that very day Gen. O.M. Mitchell had captured Huntsville, and instead of there being only two trains for us to pass as we had figured, there were three times as many, the railroad having started all its rolling stock south to prevent its capture by the Federal troops.

We kept on speeding and loafing until we reached Cass Station. Noticing a woodpile and water tank beside the track, we stopped and replenished our fuel and water as both *were beginning* to run low.

"I don't *recollect ever seeing* you fellows before," said the station agent, whose name I afterward learned was Russell, when we climbed down out of the cab.

"What have you got in *there?*" he asked, pointing to the closed boxcars.

Powder for Beauregard

"You just drop a few sparks from that pipe of yours inside and you'll find out soon enough," returned Andrews. "There's powder enough in those cars to blow you and your station into the middle of next week! We're hustling it through to Beauregard to shoot holes in Yanks with!"

"Oh, that's your lay is it?" said Russell. "Hope you get through with it all right. The Federals ain't far off, and if they stop that peanut burner of yours, you're pretty sure to find out what the inside of a prison looks like."

"Were taking our chances," said I, "but I'd hanged sight rather have the Yanks get me than run into a head-on with a southbound train. *We've lost* our *schedule* and if we don't get one pretty quick *we're going* to have trouble. Haven't you got one we can have?"

"Sure," said the tank tender. After searching his pockets, he finally located a soiled piece of paper, which he handed to Andrews.

As the men in the box cars had been ordered to keep out of sight until signaled to come out, Andrews, Wilson, Brown and I got down and piled a good supply of wood on the tender.

After filling the tank, we pulled on up the track where we stopped and while John Scott, who did the wire cutting, climbed a *telegraph pole* and shut off *telegraphic communication*, the rest of the men at Andrews' order piled railroad ties upon the track to obstruct anyone who might follow us.

Reaching Kingston, Andrews *repeated his* tale to the station agent about carrying powder to Beauregard and gave orders to the switchmen to let us in on the siding to wait for a southbound train, which we knew must pass before we could proceed.

How We Lost an Hour

For 25 minutes we fumbled and fretted, watching the southern horizon for the smoke of a pursuing locomotive. When the train from the north finally hove in sight and pulled up beside us, our hopes took another drop for there on the last car flag signals were flying to show that another train was following.

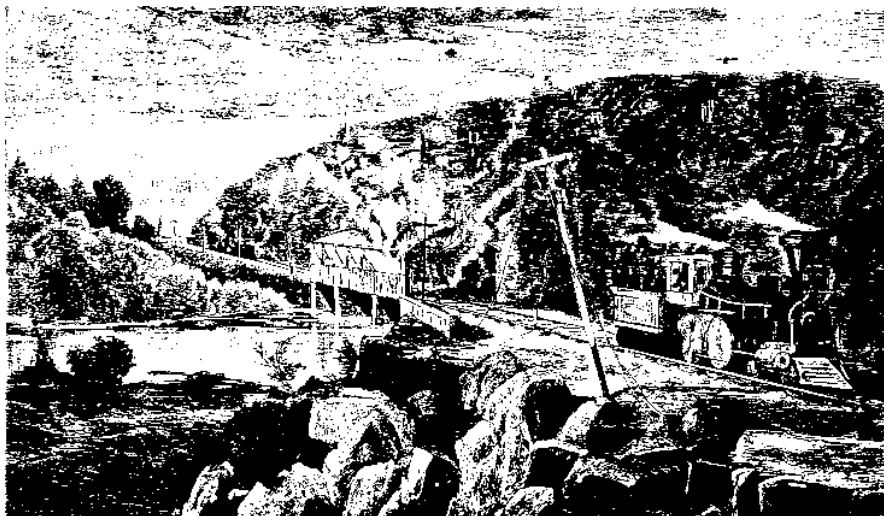
We waited for over an hour while two more trains pulled by before we were finally given a clear track to Adairsville, and there was a general sigh of relief when we pulled out on the main line.

A short distance north of Kingston we stopped to block the track again and take on a load of railroad ties. Some of the men smashed a hole in the end of the rear car and when we got under headway again, they dropped *the* heavy timbers on the track behind us.

The outlook now seemed considerably brighter, and our spirits rose perceptibly. Had w known then, however, that only a few minutes behind us, tearing along the rails, was an engine bearing Captain Fuller and corps of Confederate soldier armed with rifles, against which our short pistols were useless, w would not have felt so cheerful

About four miles from Adairsville, at Andrews' order we stopped again. Some of the men went back and tore up on rail. While the work of track destruction was going on, those of us in the engine kept watt and strained our ears for sound of pursuit when suddenly w were filled with alarm by a low whistle coming faintly to us down the track

"Every man back to the train. They're after us!" yelled Andrew to the workers, who were busy battering out spikes and bending the rails. There was a wild scramble for the boxcars and a soon as everyone was aboard, I opened her up and we sped on toward Adairsville.



The Andrews Raid would have been successful if not for the determined Confederates who chased the Union soldier:. (Capturing A locomotive)

Tied Up Again

A freight train with signals showing another train behind it was standing on the main line when we pulled up to the station, so we took the siding and waited with our hearts in our throats for the second section to arrive.

Fortunately for us it was not long in putting in an appearance, but on arrival it stopped directly across the switch over which we must pass to enter the main line again.

Andrews hurried over to the conductor and asked him to pull up and let us by, but he refused, insisting that if we proceeded we were in danger of colliding with another train which was following and which he was sure had already left Calhoun, the station ahead of us.

Andrews had it hot and heavy with this man for some time, but on promising to send a flagman ahead at every curve, the conductor finally consented to let us move on without our having to use force.

As soon as the last car had left the switch, Andrews pulled it open and swung aboard as we dashed out onto the main line.

"Keep her hot boys!" he yelled to Brown and Wilson who were hard at work heaving the heavy cordwood into the firebox

"Give her every ounce she's got Knight!" he shouted, raising his voice above the barking of the exhaust and the roar of the wheels. "Death in a wreck is better than hanging! There's no time for a flagman now!"

We took one curve after another at top speed, ready for the worst, until we would gain a clear stretch of track and get a glimpse far enough ahead to see that we were not running into a head on smash.

Courting a Collision

Behind us, the men in the boxcars were tossed about from side to side momentarily expecting to leave the track and be hurled to destruction when we went into the ditch. Had we been but a few minutes later, a wreck would have surely have occurred. As it was, we pulled into Calhoun just in time to see the passenger train for which we had so long been straining our eyes pulling out of the station toward us.

As soon as the engineer saw us, he started back toward the depot, but when he perceived that we were slowing down he stopped with his pilot trucks on the frogs of the switch which opened into the siding, blocking the rails so that we could not get by.

Andrews repeated his powder story, but the conductor and engineer were both so angry at him for taking chances of a collision that they refused to listen and would not budge an inch.

It looked for a few minutes as if Andrews would have to call out his men and move the train out of the way himself, but his demands were so positive that the conductor finally yielded and told his engineer to back far enough off the switch to let us by.

We now felt that if we could get to the Oostanaula Bridge in time to destroy it, the race would be won. More wires would then be cut and more bridges burned out without fear of pursuit, for we knew that General Mitchell was close to Chattanooga and were sure that we could make our way to his forces.

As we had made the nine miles from Adairsville to Calhoun in seven and a half minutes, we felt that we now had gained enough headway on our pursuers to stop and cut the wires and tear up the track Scott was soon at the top of one of the telegraph poles sending the wires whipping down to the ground while Andrews and the rest of the men began taking off fishplates and pulling out spikes.

How Fuller Followed

They had not been long at work, however, when around a curve only a few miles down the track I suddenly sighted the smoke of a locomotive. It was running towards us at full speed. I yelled to Andrews that we must be on our way.

Some of the men had pried loose the end of a rail, and in their haste were stumbling about, dropping their tools and getting in each other's way.

"Give me that bar, and all of you get aboard!" yelled Andrews, snatching a crowbar from one of the men.

While the rest of the party scrambled back into their "side door Pullmans," Andrews struggled and wrenched the unwieldy rail, seeking vainly to bend it out of place and tear it from the ties.

Then, seeing that the locomotive was almost on top of him, he dropped the bar. Giving me the signal to go ahead, he sprang for the handrail and swung himself aboard the last car.

With the fire flying from her drivers, I gave the "General" every ounce of steam in her boilers and we tore ahead. I glanced backward from time to time to make sure we were keeping out of rifle range.

It seems that as soon as we pulled out of Big Shanty--as I afterward learned from Conductor William Fuller himself when we met at a soldiers' reunion at Columbus, Ohio, after the war--he and his engineer, Jeff Cain, together with Anthony Murphy, then foreman of the Western and Atlantic shops, had started after us on foot.

They ran until they met the section gang whose tools we had taken and securing a handcar from them, they hurried on after us until they reached Etowa where they boarded the "Yonah" and continued the pursuit. They had no trouble in passing the break in the rails beyond Cass Station with the handcar as they had rolled it over the ties and soon had it on the track again.

At Kingston, being unable to get by the two freight trains which we had passed there, Fuller and his party ran round them on foot and, boarding the engine "Rome" which was standing on a sidetrack, started on again. As we had not stopped long enough to destroy the track again until near Adairsville, Fuller, who had now been joined by a number of Confederates, had little trouble in getting that far with the "Rome." Here he abandoned the "Yonah" and a little farther on, meeting another train we had passed, he made the crew back with him into Adairsville, where he secured an engine called the "Texas" and again started on our trail, catching his first glimpse of us when we stopped just north of Calhoun.

We soon lost sight of our pursuers, but knowing that they were still only a few minutes behind us, we could readily see that if we delayed at any of the stations ahead we would be caught like rats in a trap.

Too closely followed to stop at Oostanula bridge, which we had planned to fire, we sped on, dropping ties on the track behind us, but we were now going so fast that most of them bounded off when striking the ground and impeded the progress of the "Texas" but little.

Fighting With Freight Cars

Every time we reached the end of a straight piece of track, we could see the Confederate engine tearing after us. Reaching the top of an incline near Resaca, we uncoupled our last car, and I reversed and shot it down toward them. Engineer Bracken, however, also reversed and caught the car without its doing any damage to the "Texas." Then, pushing it ahead of them, they came on after us.

Again we repeated our tactics, but they again caught the empty car, sidetracking the two at Resaca, through which we ran at lightning speed. Their delay gave us a little more headway, and a few miles out of town we dared stop long enough to cut the wires again, fearing that if Fuller could manage to send a message on ahead of us, some station agent would sidetrack us.

Not having time enough to tear up the track, we stopped for wood near Tilton, six miles north of Resaca. The men placed the rail, which we had carried with us from near Cass Station diagonally across the track, wedging one end of it tightly.

The engineer of the "Texas" sighted it in time and stopped his locomotive.

The other side of Tilton, through which we passed in safety, we filled our tank and took on more wood while some of the men went back a short distance and obstructed the track to insure another full stop of the "Texas" out of gunshot range.

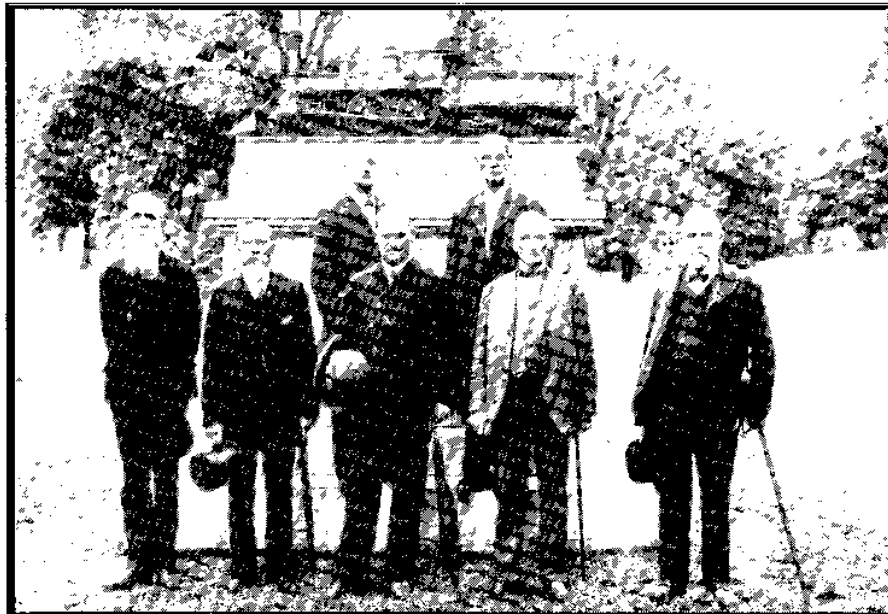
As often as we dared to stop, the men got off and cut wires and blocked the track, but not once did they get more than started to remove a rail before the roar of the "Texas" speeding toward us would reach our ears and we would have to dart on at full speed.

Once we halted in full view of a regiment of Confederate soldiers, but not long enough to give them a chance to come after us. We were constantly in view of Captain Fuller's party now, and some of them tried to pick us off with their rifles.

In spite of the closeness with which our enemies hung upon our heels, however, Andrews had not given up hope of accomplishing the work he had set out to do and was still intent upon burning the first Chickamauga bridge twelve miles north of Dalton, though Fuller was quite determined that he should not.

On we sped, through the tunnel at Tunnel Hill, where I begged Andrews to abandon the engine and either turn it loose back through the tunnel toward the "Texas" or send it on ahead for Fuller to follow. He would agree to neither plan, however, but ordered the men to set their one remaining car on fire and come aboard the engine. This they did, pouring oil upon its walls and floors, and we left it blazing on the middle of Chickamauga Bridge.

But again luck was against us. It had been raining, and the fire burned so slowly that by the time Fuller arrived on the scene the bridge had not yet caught. He had no trouble in pushing the blazing car ahead of him to Ringgold, where he sidetracked it. Here the alarm was given to the local militia, some of whom boarded the "Texas" when it again started after us.



William J. Knight (second in front row) is shown with other Andrews Raid survivors at their last reunion in 1906. (*Bryan Library's Photographic Archives*)

There is little more to tell. Wilson had thrown the last stick of wood into the fire and the water was not showing in the gauge. Soon we were only running 25 miles an hour, then 20, then 15, and then came Andrews' command: "Stop her Knight! Scatter boys! It's every man for himself now!"

History has recorded the rest. We were all taken captive in the woods by the Confederate soldiers not far from *where* we abandoned the "General."

I was one of the eight who escaped from Atlanta prison. Eight others, including Andrews, were hanged as spies, and the remaining six were exchanged."