

# PLAYING ✂️ for BLOOD

*Discover the rise and fall of the original Bald Knobbers of Southwest Missouri.*

## A HARSH JUSTICE

The settlement of America's frontier is rife with stories of vigilantes—masked self-appointed avengers who descended on their victims brandishing whips, guns, and hanging ropes. Many such organizations started out professing the best of intentions, only to descend into violence and mayhem. Initially, the small farmers who donned masks in the Black Patch Tobacco Wars of Western Kentucky simply wanted to sell their tobacco at a fair price. And the vigilante groups of early-day San Francisco and Virginia City set out only to protect their fellow citizens from rampant criminal violence. Yet, as the membership lists grew, the objectives rapidly transmogrified into something sinister. So it was when the Bald Knobber “vigilance committee” of Taney County launched its first foray, against the notorious Taylor Brothers.

Arguably, Tubal and Frank Taylor were fitting candidates for the Bald Knobbers' brand of vigilante justice. To the residents of the Missouri Ozarks of 1884, the two were well-known criminals who roamed the region perpetrating crimes that ranged from banal to sadistic. They stole chickens, shot up the local towns, took what they wanted, beat their critics, and mutilated animals for sport. When a farmer brought an indictment against Tubal, he went into hiding. On

April 8 of the following year, Frank was indicted for trashing the Eglinton general store and threatening to kill the owner, who immediately swore out a complaint against him. Two days later, the two brothers entered the store and shot both the owner and his wife, wounding them seriously but not fatally. On April 15, Frank and Tubal were locked in Forsyth's county jail pending indictment.

At ten o'clock that evening, some seventy-five to a hundred armed men rode quietly into town and dismounted at the jail. One stepped up and smashed the lock with a few blows of a sledge hammer, and a handful of the men dragged the brothers, weeping and screaming, from their cell. They tied them on two horses and silently rode out of town. After riding two miles, the grim party halted, and a rope was thrown over the limb of a scrub oak tree. The vigilantes, silent as the boys pleaded for their lives, placed the noose ends around their necks and led away the horses. The Taylor brothers were found suspended from the oak limb the next morning, with a placard affixed to Tubal's shirt:

“Beware! These are the first victims to the wrath of outraged citizens. More will follow. The Bald Knobbers.”

—By Ron Soodalter—

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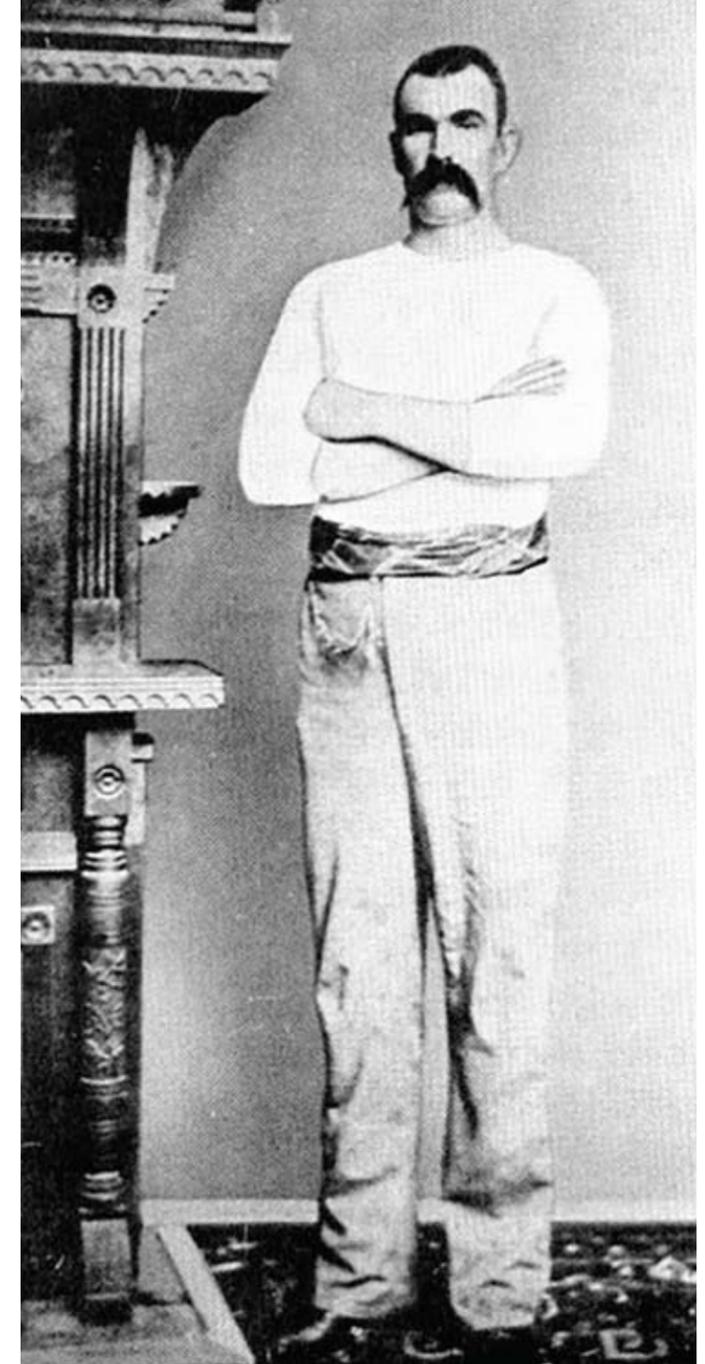
ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW BARTON



*The Shepherd of the Hills*—the 1919 film adaptation of Harold Bell Wright's novel of the same name—portrayed the masked Bald Knobbers in historically accurate detail.



Nathaniel N. "Nat" Kinney was the leader of the original Bald Knobbers, before other chapters were started. According to legend, he stood over six feet tall and always had two guns on his person.



## FOUNDING A VIGILANCE COMMITTEE

Missouri had long been ripe for the birth of a vigilance committee. In the years before the Civil War, its citizens were divided by violently opposing political views. During the conflict, Missouri was hotly contested by pro- and anti-slavery forces and was the scene of depredations by the likes of such murderous bushwhackers as William T. "Bloody Bill" Anderson and William Clarke Quantrill on the Southern side, not to mention the fanatical John R. Kelso for the North. Both Union and Confederate detachments burned entire towns—including Forsyth, the Taney County seat. Southwest Missouri's rural economy suffered accordingly. Farms stood empty, fields fallow, as Missourians on both sides were driven from their homes and from the state.

In the years following the Southern defeat, unreconstructed rebel outlaw bands such as the James and Younger gangs sprang up across the state, plundering at will and justifying murder and mayhem in the name of the Lost Cause. In many instances, what law there was had long since proved ineffectual or strongly biased, and inevitably, the vacuum it left made room for a strong vigilante organization.

By 1885, law enforcement in Taney County consisted only of a sheriff and his two deputies. Within a short time, the county went through four sheriffs, one of whom had been shot to death. On April 5, one hundred angry men held a meeting on a treeless ridge—a "bald knob" in local parlance—near Kirbyville. It was to be the first gathering of the Bald Knobbers: an organization born of both frustration and hope for the future.

In the words of regional historian Matthew J. Hernando, "Their goals included establishing an honest and thrifty local government and making the county safe for immigration, new businesses, and investment."

Its members were committed to building a modern, progressive society in the Ozarks, "bringing to the region roads, bridges, railroads, banks, greater social stability, and opportunities for profitable business," and they proscribed as enemies the lawbreakers whom they saw as obstacles to this vision. Many of the members were Union veterans, and nearly all were Republicans. A number of them had moved here from Northern states, and they were mostly members of the middle or upper class. The rolls consisted largely of attorneys, businessmen, merchants, and politicians.

At this time, vigilantism was very much a part of American life. However, where many Southern and Western vigilance committees were created as laws unto themselves, the Bald Knobbers did not consider their new body to be extralegal. They saw themselves, observes Hernando, "as an adjunct to existing law enforcement. In their own eyes, they were acting mainly as 'militant reinforcements' to the new Republican regime."

The leader of the Bald Knobbers was a giant of a man named Nathaniel N. "Nat" Kinney. Although reports of his size varied, according to some accounts, he stood a well-proportioned six feet, seven inches tall, with broad shoulders and a sweeping black moustache. Kinney was a recent arrival in Taney County, having moved from Springfield just two

years earlier. He had a somewhat peripatetic history. Originally a native of West Virginia, he had fought for the Union, and after the war, had moved to Indiana, Colorado, and Topeka, Kansas, where he worked as a superintendent on the railroad. In 1880, he left Topeka for Springfield and eventually made his way to Taney County.

The Bald Knobbler vigilance committee was the last in a series of organizations Kinney had joined. While living in Topeka, he became an officer in both the Ancient Order of United Workmen and the Topeka Rifles, a strike-breaking local militia created by the railroad. He was also a member of the Grange and the Grand Army of the Republic, despite being an outspoken supporter of the Democratic Party. His personality matched his size, and he soon made himself noticed in and around Forsyth.

Like Kinney, many of the Bald Knobbers had come to Southwest Missouri after the war to take advantage of the cheap land. In the late 1860s, the federal government made available some three hundred thousand acres in Taney County and offered much of it to homesteaders for nominal fees. Still, despite the increased availability of affordable, arable land, Taney County remained relatively poor in comparison to its neighboring counties—a source of frustration to its more upwardly mobile citizenry, who blamed much of the county's misfortunes on rampant crime and political corruption. Their perception of the criminal situation was accurate. In 1860, just prior to the war, the inmate population of the state's prisons was 286. By 1880, the number had swelled to 2,041. Journalists at the time reported that, in the two decades following the war's end, there were upward of forty murders in Taney County alone and not a single conviction. Although this number might have been inflated, there existed an undeniable atmosphere of violence. The Bald Knobbers considered themselves the remedy for what ailed Taney County, and it would ultimately prove to be harsh medicine indeed.

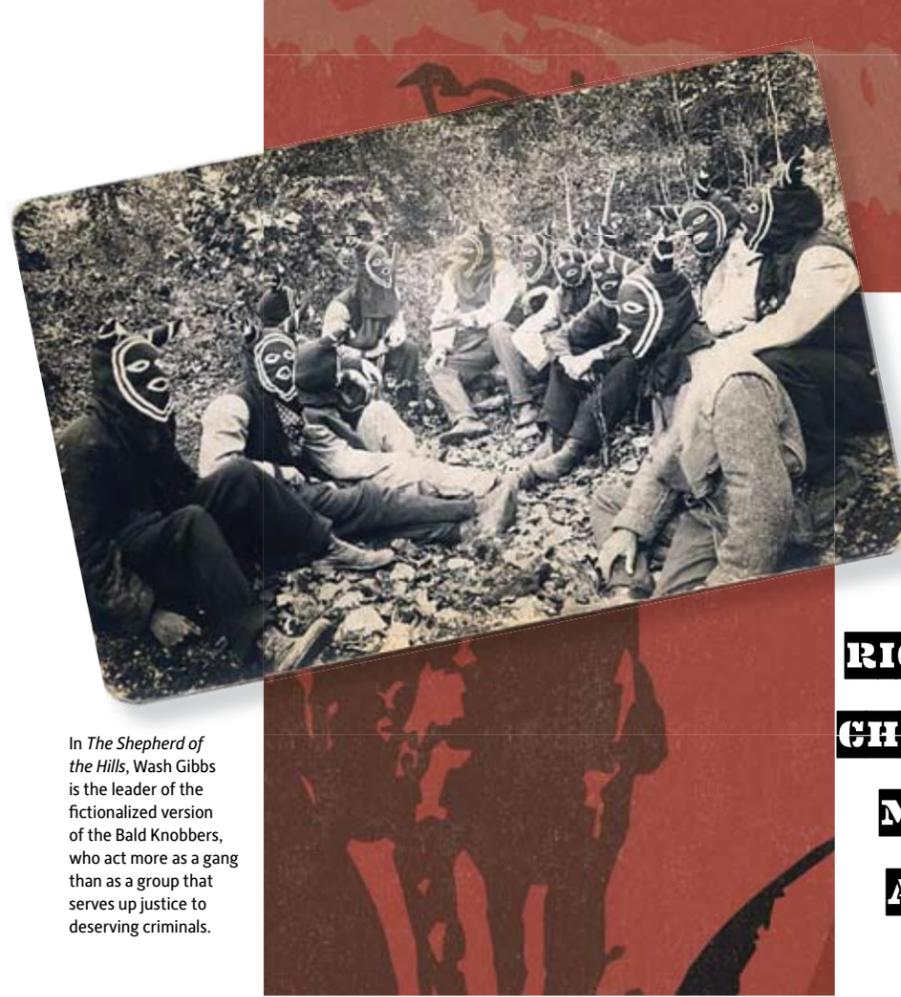
## THE BALD KNOBBERS RIDE

After voting to form a "committee for law and order," the Bald Knobbers divided up into legions, each commanded by a captain. Big Nat Kinney was named chieftain of the whole organization. When they hanged the two Taylor boys less than two weeks later, the seriousness of their purpose became clear to all. And while some community members condemned the Bald Knobbers' actions, their ranks soon swelled to more than three hundred men.

Many of the members adhered to their original program of aiding law enforcement by punishing violent offenses and crimes against property, as well as preventing a return of the Democrats to power. Still, there were those in the committee's burgeoning ranks—men whom one his-

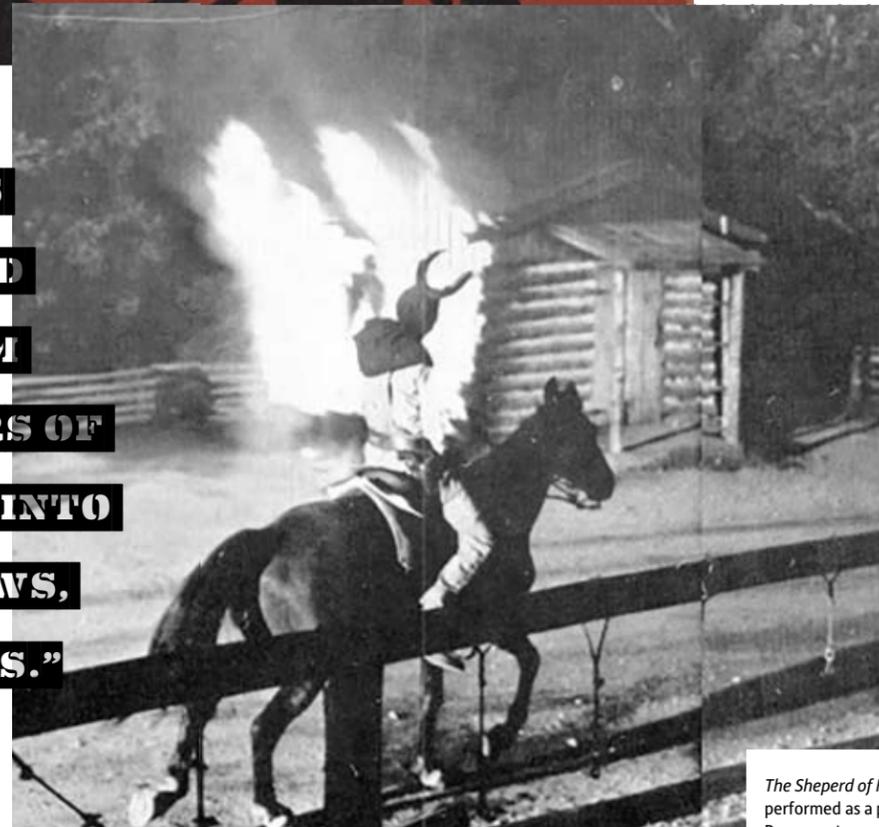
torian describes as a hard core of extremists and radicals—who allowed the violence to get out of hand. Soon, they were staging nocturnal raids not only on criminals, but also on those whom they considered undesirable. The list included gamblers, wife beaters, and homesteaders, or squatters. One old timer recalled, "It was rough. You had to walk a straight line. If a man began getting ornery with his wife, she'd let the Bald Knobbers know and they'd slip down and beat him up." And since many of the Bald Knobbers earned at least a part of their living by cutting and selling timber, those squatters who presumed to fell logs on land claimed, or simply used, by the vigilantes became targets of their wrath.

"Still others," states Hernando, "the Bald Knobbers forced out simply because they somehow had managed to anger, annoy, or inconvenience the vigilantes."



In *The Shepherd of the Hills*, Wash Gibbs is the leader of the fictionalized version of the Bald Knobbers, who act more as a gang than as a group that serves up justice to deserving criminals.

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*The Sheperd of Hills* is performed as a play in Branson at an outdoor theater. Here, they re-enact the Bald Knobbers' terror in rural southwest Missouri, setting a cabin ablaze in the night.

The night riders sometimes worked in conjunction with the courts. On one occasion, they scooped up two men who were carrying concealed weapons and deposited them in the county jail. Social position mattered little. To the Bald Knobbers' thinking, no one was so highly placed that he could not be brought down, should the situation warrant it. With questionable justification, they drove out a respected justice of the peace and raided the home of a minister and sitting judge who happened to hold a lease to property that some of the vigilantes coveted.

It is estimated that scores, and possibly hundreds, of residents and their families were warned away and driven from the county by the night riders. As the violence escalated, a contingent began to form in opposition to the Bald Knobbers. In February 1886, Nat Kinney himself shot and killed a young man with whom he had been carrying on a personal feud. Although he was exonerated, many felt that he had gotten away with murder. It was exactly the sort of situation the Bald Knobbers had been created to stop.

With this killing, the Anti-Bald Knobber faction solidified as a cohesive body, intent on stopping the violence. The differences between the two groups were palpable. Where the Bald Knobbers were overwhelmingly pro-Union men and Republicans, their opponents were almost all Southern-born Democrats with long-standing Rebel sympathies. They were also mostly farmers who were steeped in and committed to the traditional rural and agricultural values of the Ozarks.

The Anti-Bald Knobbers petitioned the governor to allow them to form a home militia, in order to counter the acts of their adversaries. They requested weapons with which to combat the vigilantes; the governor refused. Instead, he sent his adjutant general, J.C. Jamison, who gave the Bald Knobbers two choices: disband immediately or face a state militia. The vigilantes chose the path of moderation, and on April 10, 1886, the Bald Knobbers of Taney County officially disbanded—at least on paper.

Most of the members left off their vigilante activities, turning instead to a more conventional path. They saw to it that the local political offices were filled with ex-Bald Knobbers and proceeded to use the courts to prosecute offenders, most of whom were Democrats and members of the Anti-Bald Knobber faction. And prosecute they did, often to the point of persecution. The most trivial offenses, such as the seining of fish and hunting without a license, were flagged, and the offenders fined or jailed. Former night riders were now using their own political machine to harass their adversaries and maintain control of the community.

A small number of Bald Knobbers under Nat Kinney had refused to heed the adjutant general's call to disband. They continued to meet and to ride down on their neighbors. Meanwhile, natives of nearby Christian and Douglas counties formed their own iterations of the vigilance committees. Although they were made up of the same class of citizens who had opposed the Taney County vigilantes, they chose to borrow the Bald

Knobber name, perhaps because Nat Kinney himself served as their "advisor" in adapting the structure of the original band.

However, that was where the similarity ended. Where the original Taney County members had been professional men, the Bald Knobbers of Christian and Douglas counties were mostly farmers. They were poorer, more religiously driven, and quicker to use violence in their efforts to drive out the unwanted and the unrighteous. They instituted whippings and worse to drive their message home. They maintained a narrow moral agenda and set out to ensure that it was adhered to, with torture and death held out as the penalties for transgressors. According to one judge who presided over a subsequent murder trial, they "thought that they had a right to go out and make humanity do right according to their notions of right."

The new Bald Knobbers differed from the original chapter in another, more dramatic way. The Taney County Bald Knobbers—who believed, at least initially, that they were acting on behalf of law enforcement—saw no need to disguise themselves. The newly-formed so-called Bald Knobbers of Christian and Douglas counties distinguished themselves by the wearing of masks—and they were terrifying; made of black cambric or calico, with the eyes and mouth cut out and outlined in white and a pair of rigid horns protruding from the top, they covered the entire head. The sight of dozens of

mounted men carrying torches and wearing these ghoulish masks was chilling to behold.

Some of their victims were guilty of nothing more egregious than being public nuisances, or simply criticizing the vigilantes. Saloon keepers and gamblers were primary targets, as the vigilantes set about destroying various dens of iniquity. As the movement spread across Missouri, Knobbers turned their attention to discouraging new homesteaders. They burned down houses, barns, and other structures; whipped, beat, and shot the settlers; and conducted a general reign of terror.

### **'THE FINAL STRAW**

On the night of March 11, 1887, they went too far. Fortified on local whiskey, a mob of twenty-five to thirty members of the Christian County chapter broke into a cabin where two families—the Edenses and the Greenes—were staying. The sleeping inhabitants included an infant, its sick mother, and two young children. One of the Edens clan had spoken disparagingly about the vigilantes, and they were bent on retribution. Without hesitation, they smashed down the door with an axe, shot two men to death in front of their families, grievously wounded a third, and blew a finger off the hand of one of the women when she deflected a gun barrel aimed at her head. As chronicler Hernandez put it, within a few moments' time, "the vigilantes had transformed themselves from righteous defenders of ... Christian morality into murderers, outlaws, and social pariahs."

The legal floodgates opened. Some eighty men were indicted, twenty-five for the Edens-Greene outrage alone. Several men received fines, others were sentenced to prison terms, and four of the murderers were condemned to die. One escaped; the other three, including their chieftain, were hanged.

There was still the odd outbreak of violence. In August 1888, after several unsuccessful attempts, the Anti-Bald Knobbers succeeded in assassinating Nat Kinney in retribution for the man he had slain years earlier. But for all intents and purposes, the Bald Knobber vigilante movement was dead. Begun as an earnest attempt to right wrongs and improve the community, it had transplanted and degenerated into a bastion for masked thugs, bigots, and bullies and was best left as an artifact of Missouri's wilder frontier past.