

### The Marais des Cygnes Massacre: A First-Hand Account

**On May 18, 1858 eleven free-state supporters were kidnapped by a group of proslavery men. The free-state men were taken to a ravine and shot. Twenty-one years after the tragedy, Sarah Read, the wife of one of the free-state men, retold her story. Her husband was wounded during the Marais des Cygnes massacre, but he survived. Mr. Read was a minister. Read her story, and answer the questions.**

*On the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, 1858, soon after we had eaten breakfast, Mr. Read went to Mr. Nichols', a neighbor one mile distant, for the purpose of getting a horse, and while there Charles Hamilton came up with a band of thirty men and took him prisoner. The house where he was taken was in full view of our house, but being very busy, I did not see nor hear anything until Mr. Brockett came to our house and informed me that Captain Hamilton had come in with a band of men and was taking our men prisoner... I feared that they would take him into Missouri, and then I should never know what became of him. I hastily prepared to follow them to know if possible what they did....*

*I ....went about two miles before I discovered them... I was on a high mound, and consequently it was very steep down where I had to go into a timbered ravine. While passing through the timber, I heard the discharge of arms. The thought occurred to me that they might be shooting the prisoners but I tried to banish it from my mind, for I thought they would pretend to have some sort of formal trial before they put them to death, but I felt alarmed, and hurried on faster... As I left the timber I ascended to the top of another mound, when I saw some five to eight mounted men. I felt perplexed, not knowing certainly who they were. I took my bonnet and I ran toward them, waving it. They waited once or twice for a few seconds, and then turned and went down the mound. At this time I had got so near them that I discovered our pony. Then I knew who they were, and going on I presently saw more of the same party coming toward me. I turned to them and asked them to stop. I then asked them where the men were they had taken prisoners near the Post. The foremost man gave me an evasive reply. I then said, "You are the men, for there ... is a man leading my pony." He then called to the man with the pony, and beckoned with his hand for him to come back. Some words passed between the men which I did not understand. The man that had the pony then led it to me and said. "If it is yours take it," and rode off... I then asked, "Where are the prisoners: my husband is among them?" One of the men replied that they could not tell my husband among so many....*

*I then went on in the direction they came until I saw what I supposed to be a part of Hamilton's men lying on the ground in a ravine. I spoke to them and asked them if they had some prisoners. I repeated the question two or three times. The last time I recognized the voice of my husband, and went to him, and he told me that they had all been shot and would all die. When he raised up his head the blood was oozing from his mouth and running from his wound profusely. O, what a sight! – Eleven strong men shot down by the ruthless band of pro-slavery ruffians, and there they lay in the grass among the rocks, the hot sun beating down on their poor, mangled, bleeding bodies. Of them all but one was uninjured. My feelings were beyond description for a moment, and at first I felt faint. My husband requested me to go and get help as soon as possible...*

*I then started to obtain relief; but where was I to go? I had never been in that place before, and to think that they might all be dead before I could obtain relief was harrowing...*

*I went directly to the house of Mr. Harigrove, senior, and there found the two Mrs. Hairgroves and Mrs. Colpetzer. I related the murder to them, and that I wanted them to go back with me. Mrs. Colpetzer said that her oxen and wagon were there and if we could get them hitched on, we could go with them. We managed to get the oxen on the wagon, and got water, bed clothes and other accessories, and started for the ravine. It was rather difficult to make the oxen go where we wanted them. Mrs. Colpetzer and Mrs. Hairgrove would frequently get out of the wagon to make them go right. ... When we came to the ravine, we found five men who were dead, and Charles Snyder, who was badly wounded. He said that the others had gone into the timber to get water, but that he could not get there. I gave him some water, and put a sheet over him to shield him from the burning sun. Mrs. Colpetzer found her husband – dead. I stood with her for a moment beside his lifeless form, and then busied myself brushing the flies from the faces of the other men, and protecting them as well as I could by covering them with their hats and caps. Mrs. Hairgrove and myself went into the timber to look for our husbands. She soon found her husband, and I found his father who was very faint. I gave him some water, and put a spread over him. He said that if I did not find Mrs. Read in the timber, he thought he had succeeded in reaching some house .... I found him... about 11 o'clock at night, lying on the ground... almost the first words he said to me were, "If, when I really come to die, it does not seem any harder than it did today, when I thought I must die, it will not be much to die".*

### **Questions:**

1. Why was Mrs. Read afraid they would take her husband into Missouri?
2. What does the phrase "discharge of arms" mean?
3. Why did the pony give Mrs. Read a clue as to the identity of the men she encountered?
4. When Mrs. Read came upon a group of men lying on the ground in a ravine, who did she originally think they were? How did she finally identify them?

5. When Mrs. Read and the other women took the oxen and wagon to help the wounded men, they took certain supplies. What were the supplies for, and why were they needed?
6. Why do you think Mrs. Read remembers the Marias des Cygnes Massacre in such detail after 21 years? Do you think her memory is accurate?
7. Do you think Mrs. Read was brave? Explain your answer.