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Sam Hildebrand: Missouri Bushwhacker

Russell Wetherington

History 492

Dr. Wilson

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PREFACE

Sam Hildebrand is my great, great uncle; I have been interested in him since I was a little boy. It's my hope that this paper will provide an unbiased account of his life.

I wish to acknowledge two individuals, my grandmother, Sophia Fox, and Mr. Martha Sue Wilke, for their assistance in researching this paper.

When we consider happenings of the U.S. Civil War, the most popular image is that of large armies fighting decisive battles. Places such as Gettysburg, Shiloh, and Appomattox have an almost religious aura about them. Yet, the Civil War had a bitter side that is often forgotten. For areas such as rural Missouri, a civil war within the Civil War exited.

Although technically a Union state, Missouri has the dubious notoriety of being one of the Civil War's major guerrilla battlegrounds. The ferocity of this inner war matches anything within the American experience and would today be more associated with Lebanon than with the Midwest. This kind of war was one of personal vendetta mixed with local political interest. Bands of irregular Union and Confederate guerrillas, also knows as bushwhackers, roamed the rural portions of Missouri. This paper will examine the life of one of these bushwhackers, Sam Hildebrand.

Samuel S. Hildebrand (from now on referred to as "Sam" or "Hildebrand") was born on January 6, 1836; he was the fifth child of a ten child family. During the late eighteenth century the Hildebrand clan immigrated to the United States from the present German state of Bavaria. Sam's parents were pioneers who arrived in eastern Missouri in 1832. Eventually, his family moved to the Big River community in St. Francois County, southwest of St. Louis. Among the initial settlers in their area, they settled on choice land. Their farm, although small and crude by today's standards, was then considered substantial. The family's two story stone house is still in use today. This prosperity caused jealously among

¹Hildebrand, Samuel S. Autobiography of Samuel S. Hildeband. Jefferson City, MO: State Times Book and Job Printing House, 1870, 30. Note: No evidence can be found for what name Hildebrand's middle initial represents.

their neighbors and may have influenced them to latter turn against the Hildebrands.

It appears that prior to the Civil War, The Hildebrand clan had already angered their neighbors. Sam Hildebrand's autobiography refers to disputes with neighbors over hogs that had been allowed to run wild. Apparently, as more settlers moved into the area, they also turned loose their hogs. What followed was a series of disputed "hog claims" that the Hildebrands settled through force. Hildebrand tacitly admits this in his autobiography (1870):

The Dutch (local German immigrants) out swore us, and we soon found the Hildebrand family branded by them with the very unjust and unpleasant epithet of 'hog thieves,' but we went in on the muscle and still held the woods. ²

Considering the strained prewar relationship between the Hildebrands and their neighbors, it is easy to see how this local feud could develop into an ugly wartime situation.

One prewar factor that needs to be considered is the demographic changes Missouri experienced during the mid-nineteenth century. The initial settlers who settled in Southeast Missouri were from the upland Southern stock, but the 1850's saw an increase in primarily German immigrants. This increased immigration was due to the upheaval caused by Europe's 1848 Revolution. Michael Fellman's The Inside War (1989) shows the importance of these new immigrants. He stresses the differences between Missouri's slave owning interior and the state's

²ibid., 32. Note: Hildebrand refers to the German immigrants as being "Dutch"; this was a common ninetenth century slang refering to Germanic people.

"northern" commercial center, St. Louis. Fellman contends that Missouri's Civil War divisiveness was in part do to economic readjustment.³ The old agrarian class was being replaced by an urban, commercial class.

The German immigrants who supported this economic change were also against slavery. Although the 1860 federal census reveals that most Missourians were still overwhelmingly "southern" in origin, Fellman shows by this time 60% of St. Louis' population was foreign born. These predominantly German immigrants would become ardent Union supporters who formed volunteer companies destined to operate in Southeast Missouri.

By the early 1850's, the Hildebrand name was well established in the Big River community. On October 30, 1854, Sam married Margaret Hampton.⁴ Their marriage produced five children. As the war approached, Hildebrand claimed that he did not have a political stand toward the issue of succession: "I had never made politics my study; I had no education whatever, and had to rely exclusively on what others told me." This statement is not surprising because Missourians approached the issue of succession cautiously. Eighty Percent of the white male voters voted for the Union in the February, 1861, special election. It should be noted that Sam's brother William fought in a volunteer Union regiment.

³Fellman, Michael. *Inside War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. 6-7.

⁴Breihan, Carl W. Sam Hildebrand: Guerilla. Wauwatossa, WI: Leather Stocking Books, 1984,

⁵Hildebrand, 33.

⁶Fellman, 8.

Sam Hildebrand could have also remained with the Union. What then brought him into rebellion?

The Hildebrand Clan had already developed a reputation of being local bullies. In May 1861 Union forces overran much of Missouri. Prosouthern Missouri State Guard units, although still skirmishing with the federal forces, had been pushed into the extreme Southeast portion of the state. Both sides needed horses and a clandestine market for stolen horses quickly developed. Union forces holding St. Francois County believed that any horse stealing was for the benefit of Confederate forces. Horses belonging to some prominent members of the St. Francis County community had been stolen and a Union man, a mister Ringer, had been killed on August 9, 1861.7

One of Hildebrand's relatives, a cousin, Allen Roan, had been implicated in the killing and he had also stolen a horse of a Union man, Mr. Dunwoody. According to Sam Hildebrand, Roan approached him with an offer to trade horses and Hildebrand agreed. Hildebrand stated he did not know that the horse in question had been stolen. This horse did not work well with a plow, however, so Hildebrand subsequently traded him off to a neighbor at which point the horses' identity was discovered. Circumstantial evidence linked Hildebrand with Roan in stealing Dunwoody's horse.

Local members of the pro-Union Big River Mills Vigilance
Committee, upon learning of Hildebrand's trading of the Drunwoody

⁷Hildebrand, 35.

⁸Thompson, Henry C. Sam Hildebrand Rides Again. Rev. ed. Bonne Terre, MO: Bonne Terre Printing Company, 1967, 3.

horse, vowed to kill Sam and his brother Frank. This Committee was led by Firman McIlvaine and included such prominent men of the community as: James Craig, John House, Joe McGahan, John Dunwoody (the owner of the stolen horse), and William Patton. 9

It should be noted that the Hildebrand brothers may have already attracted the attention of regular federal authorities. On September 3, 1861, Colonel Chester Harding, 10th Missouri Volunteers, wrote to the assistant adjutant general of the Western Department in St. Louis: "...I desired very much to arrest 2 (sic) of the more notorious leaders of the rebels, one Hildebrand and Dr. Smith; both fled." 10 It is not clear which Hildebrand, Sam or Frank, the colonel is referring to because the 10th Missouri was operating in a wide area at this time. It is also possible that the person mentioned in this dispatch may not be related to Sam Hildebrand's family.

Little contemporary evidence exists to connect Sam Hildebrand or his brother with any wrong doing suggesting they may have been innocent victims of overzealousness. Conrad's *Encyclopedia of History of Missouri*, however, depicts the Hildebrand boys as thieves. Specifically, Conrad states Frank Hildebrand stole a horse at gunpoint with from a Mrs. Carney. 11

⁹Breihan, 6.

¹⁰Official Records of the War of Rebellion, Series 1, Volumes 3, Series 1. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881, 160.

¹¹Conrad, Howard L., ed. Encyclopedia of the History of Missori., Volume 3. New York: Southern History Company, 1912, 243.

During the turbulent times of the Civil War, the normal system of justice had broken down. Vigilantes on both sides of the succession issue soon assumed power in their respectful areas. Sam and Frank Hildebrand were aware of the death threat against them. Hildebrand claims that he and his brother Frank would have willingly submitted to normal authorities "... with a guarantee of a fair trial"; but, they doubted they would receive justice. 12

Instead, Sam and Frank Hildebrand hid in the woods next to their homes where they remained until late October, 1861. One evening Sam went to his family's home to get supplies and warm clothing. Firman McIlvaine and the Committee ambushed Hildebrand at his home and Sam barley escaped. The next day Sam moved his family to the Flat Woods community in the southwestern part of St. François County¹³.

Frank Hildebrand, in contrast to his brother's abandonment of their hide-out, remained in the woods until mid-November, 1861. He then attempted to make amends with local Union authorities by enrolling in the local Home Guards' unit at Potosi, Missouri. Frank hoped that this move would dispel any feeling that he was a southern sympathizer.

After presenting himself to the commanding officer, Captain Castleman, Frank was arrested. McIlvaine and his group were summoned and given custody of Frank. 14 They took Frank before a local judge, Franklin Murhpy. The vigilantes hoped they could convince Murphy to

¹²Hildebrand, 37.

¹³Breihan, 7.

¹⁴Thompson, 5.

dispense with normal procedure and conduct a quick bench trial so Frank could be hung immediately. Murhpy resisted their efforts to use his office saying he could only hold Frank Hildebrand in custody until a jury could be convened. Hoping to find a more sympathetic judge, McIlvaine's party then took Frank to St. Genevieve County. Judge R. M. Cole, however, was no more helpful to the vigilantes as was Judge Murhpy¹⁵. Failing to get a local judge to dispense an arbitrary death sentence, the Big River Mills Vigilance Committee hanged Frank Hildebrand on November 20, 1861.16

From a period of six months after November, 1861, it appears that Sam Hildebrand and his family lived in relative peace in their Flat Woods home. He knew of his brothers hanging as well as the looting of his family's cabin at Big River. In April 1862 a Union sympathizer name George Cornecious provided the Vigilance Committee with information on Hildebrand and his family. Firman McIlvaine and Joe McGahan gathered eighty soldiers from Ironton and ambushed Hildebrand at his Flat Woods cabin, wounding him below the kneecap. Sam was still able to escape into the nearby woods. The Union militia evicted Hildebrand's family from their cabin, burning it and most of their possessions. 17

At this point, Hildebrand claims he decided to fight back:

As I lay in that gully, suffering with my wounds inflicted by United

States soldiers, I declared war. I determined to fight it out with them,

¹⁵ ibid.

¹⁶Hildebrand, 44.

¹⁷ibid, 49.

and by the assistance of my faithful gun, 'Kill Devil,' to destroy as many of my blood-thirsty enemies as I possibly could. 18

Hildebrand actually acquired "Kill Devil" later 19. It is clear from the melodramatic statement that Hildebrand felt he had been wronged by the Union.

The most immediate problem pressing Hildebrand was finding shelter for his family. Sam located new lodging through the help of a neighbor who was also able to put him in contact with members of the State Guard operating as guerrillas. These men, loosely commanded by a Captain Bolin, agreed to take Hildebrand south to their headquarters in Green County, Arkansas.²⁰

Having recuperated somewhat from his injury, Hildebrand appeared before the local Confederate commander at Bloomfield, Missouri, General Jeff Thompson. During this meeting Thompson allegedly gave Hildebrand a written commission (there is no record of this) saying, "Here, I give you a Major's commission; go where you please, take what men you can pick up, fight on your own hook and report to me every six months." 21

Hildebrand believed that this commission allowed him to form " an independent company of my own--to pick up a few men if I can get them-go where I please--when I please--and when I go (sic) against my old

¹⁸ibid

¹⁹Thompson, 9. Note: Hildebrand's autobiography makes no mention of how Hildebrand acquired "Kill Devil." Henry Thompsons book offers a humerous anecdote of dubious accuracy.

²⁰Wilke, 3. Note: Hildebrand's family edured several more months of harrasement behind Union lines before they were able to move south Green County, Arkansas.

²¹Breihan, 15.

personal enemies up in Missouri, I am expected to do a *Major* (sic) part of the fighting myself."22

Hildebrand convalesced with the Confederate guerrillas in Green County, Arkansas, for approximately six weeks. Then, on June 1, 1862, he headed north toward St. Francis, County, Missouri. Moving into the Flat Woods community in mid-June, 1862, Hildebrand killed the informant, George Cornecious and then proceeded to the home of his nemesis, Firman McIlvaine. Waiting several days near McIlvaine's home for an opportunity, Hildebrand fatally shot McIlvaine on June 23.24 Hildebrand later failed in an attempt to kill Joe McGahan, another prominent member of the Vigilance Committee. Hildebrand then returned to the Green County, Arkansas.

In response for Hildebrand's killing of Cornecious and McIlvaine, three companies of Union troops were called out. These troops were bent on revenge and, in a short span of time, Sam would loose two brothers and an uncle. In early July, 1862, Union troops proceeded to the old Hildebrand homestead and forced Sam's elderly mother out of the family home. 25

On July 6, a Union calvary detachment under the command of a Captain Flanche arrived at the St. Josephs Lead Mine near Big River Mills, Missouri. There they called out Sam's younger brother William and a man named Landusky, who had been engaged to Sam's deceased sister

²²Hildebrand, 56.

²³Thompson, 9.

²⁴Hldebrand, 62.

²⁵Breihan, 21.

Mary. The two men were shot as they exited the mine. In addition, on July 10, Union troops killed John Roan. Roan was Hildebrand's uncle and father of Allen Roan who allegedly traded Sam a stolen horse.²⁶

On July 23, Union troops again visited the old Hildebrand farm with the intention of burning the property. Sam's thirteen year old brother, Henry, was still on the farm tending crops. The commanding officer present, a Captain Adolph, ordered Henry to vacate the property; Henry complied with the order but was shot as he rode away.²⁷

Almost a year later, on March 29, 1863, a Union Army officer, J. Kellerman, referred to the above incident in a letter to his commanding officer:

... Capt. Gregg of the Militia spent the whole of last summer with the 5th Missouri who were then guarding the I.M.R.R. (Iron Mountain Rail Road) without any remuneration trying to get a hold of him. they shot Roan(,) two brothers of Hildebrand and 6 or 8 (sic) others of his gang but never would get this Samuel Hildebrant (sic) although they grazed him twice pretty closely and wounded him once.²⁸

Hildebrand did not immediately learn of his youngest brother's killing because he was on another raid. In this raid he began using the tactics which made him infamous. Hildebrand's raids usually followed a set pattern. He would move into Southeast Missouri from Arkansas attempting to avoid contact with Union forces until he had reached his

²⁶Thompson, 13.

²⁷Wilke, 5.

²⁸U.S. War Dept Collection of Confederate Archives, *Union Provost Marshal File Relating to Civilians*. Microfiche Copy 345, Roll 127, File: Hildebrand, Samuel S. Note: Union reports spell Hildebrand's name in various ways.

destination. Hildebrand often went alone or was accompanied by a small body of men. Usually, these men would have their own scores to settle in their communities. In mid-July, Hildebrand was in company with two other men.

Moving through Stoddard County, Missouri, Hildebrand and his party encountered a man along the roadway. Hildebrand and his men often wore federal uniforms to mask their movement while on raids²⁹. This practice also had sinister purpose of confusing civilians into idle talk. In the case of this unfortunate civilian, Hildebrand asked whether he knew of any southern sympathizers in the area. The man replied that he had, in fact, been compiling a list of "disloyal" citizens. Hildebrand immediately killed the informer. Referring to this incident in his autobiography, Hildebrand claimed he "had no compunction of conscience for having ended the days of such a scoundrel."³⁰

In another raid in August, Hildebrand, moving again through
Stoddard County, Missouri, visited a man named Stokes. Hildebrand and
Stokes were friends although Sam suspected the other man of being a
"double agent." Sam, after striking up conversation with his "friend,"
mentioned that he would be at another friend's house that evening before
proceeding north to St. Francois, County. Hildebrand arranged for two of
his men, disguised as federal soldiers, to arrive at Stokes home
immediately after Sam's departure. These men urgently informed Stokes
that they were searching for the "guerrilla Hildebrand" and asked if Stokes
had seen Sam. The unfortunate Stokes related that he had just spoken with

²⁹Thompson, 13.

³⁰Hildebrand, 76.

Hildebrand and that he would gladly take the two soldiers where Hildebrand would be staying for the evening. Stokes was shot soon afterward.31

These two situations support Hildebrand's image of being a ruthless guerrilla and underscore the plight of the non combatant Missourian. What options did civilians have when encountering either Union forces or Missouri "bushwhackers." Preyed upon by both sides, civilians learned to adapt. Michael Fellman's *Inside War* coins the term "survival lies" meaning that one said or did what the situation immediately demanded. 32 Was Stokes really Hildebrand's enemy or was he afraid that he would be burned out by Union troops by not providing information about Hildebrand?

For the remainder of 1862, Hildebrand continued his raids into Southeast Missouri. In late September, Hildebrand claims in his autobiography that he entered Southeast Missouri with three men from William Quantrell's gang (there is no conformation of these men riding with Hildebrand). On this raid, Hildebrand used a tactic that he would often employ. Finding a federal camp, Hildebrand and his party of three raced through the surprised Union soldiers, shooting at them as they passed.³³ Then, they made a quick escape. Usually, this tactic worked because the guerrillas had the element of surprise.

³¹Thompson, 17.

³²Fellman, 49.

³³Breihan, 44.

Despite this reckless example, Sam was for the most-part cautious. He usually stalked his victims choosing to attack only when it was safe to do so. Because there were various bounties on his head, Hildebrand was himself often the prey. Civilians scouting for the Union Army were the biggest threat to Hildebrand because they had more time to watch the trails Hildebrand used. This forced Sam to often double back on his trail to see if he was being followed.

The year 1863 saw a decided downturn in Confederate fortunes of war, particularly in Southeast Missouri. Large-scale Confederate military operations were limited to Arkansas. In the spring of 1863 Confederate calvary under Colonel Joe Shelby raided into Southeast Missouri.³⁴ Although one might expect otherwise, Hildebrand made no effort to help this expedition. This raises the question of what use to the South were guerillas like Hildebrand if they wouldn't cooperate with regular Confederate military operations?

Hildebrand, and guerrillas like him, were of little tactical value to southern commanders; they could rarely be counted on to attack a well defended enemy position. Yet, strategically, the Confederacy benefited from the existence of guerrilla raiders. Guerrillas pinned down federal troops who could have been more profitably used elsewhere. Some Confederate leaders, however, felt the price of guerilla warfare was too high. Whereas General Sterling Price supported such individuals as William "Bill" Quantrill, other Confederate leaders like Kirby Smith found

³⁴Ingenthron, Elmo. Border-Land Rebellion 2nd ed. Branson, MO: The Ozark Mountaineer, 1980, 276.

the employment of guerillas unacceptable.³⁵ Nevertheless, it was guerrillas like Hildebrand who remained the primary adversary of Union forces in Southeast Missouri.

Beginning in 1863, one begins to see more of Hildebrand mentioned in Union Army dispatches later printed in the Official Records of the War of Rebellion. For example, Major Samuel Montgomery at Bloomfield, Missouri, writes Brigadier General Clinton Fisk, commander at Pilot Knob, Missouri, December 11, 1863.

... Capt. Preuitt and company have just returned. They gave Hilderbrand and his gang chase until they crossed the St. Francis River where our horses could go no further, they being literally worn out. The enemy are the most rugged and thieving rascals that ever invaded the state. Positive evidence shows that they came for nothing but plunder³⁶.

Union commanders in their correspondence often expressed interest in killing Hildebrand. Because Sam often operated in federal uniform, he could be considered a spy and could be executed.

During the remainder of the war, Hildebrand continued his raids north into Missouri. He claims that General Sterling Price in the spring of 1864 requested that he and other guerrillas capture the St. Joseph Lead Mines³⁷. The lead from these mines was considered a strategic resource

³⁵Brownlee, Richard S. Gray Ghosts of the Confederacy. Baton Ruge: Louisana State University Press, 1958, 133.

³⁶Official Records, Pt. 1, Vol. 22. Series I, 766.

³⁷Wilke, 13.

and Price apparently needed it for supplies. No confirmation of this event can be found other than in Hildebrand's autobiography.

Hildebrand continued his forays throughout 1864 and the spring of 1865. As late as April 26, 1865, Hildebrand was still raiding into St. Francois, County³⁸. Yet, even someone as desperate as Hildebrand had to bow to the reality. Robert E. Lee had already surrendered in Virginia and forces under Kirby Smith in Texas were preparing to surrender. Hildebrand realized he could not survive long as an independent outlaw once peace was declared. Nevertheless, he wasn't happy about the thought of surrendering; in his autobiography he states his feeling toward surrender:

I cared not so much about the general result. I knew but little and cared still less about the great political problems the war was supposed to have solved. . . . The practical question with me was, whether all the scoundrels in the nation were yet killed off or not. As far as my knowledge extended the war had only gobbled up one tenth of them³⁹. Sam received a parole in Jacksonport, Arkansas on May 26, 1865.

Hildebrand's career as a bushwhacker ended with the war. Because he found it impossible to return to St. Francois, County, he and his family drifted from one place to another. Sam Hildebrand was fatally shot in 1872 while resisting arrest of Pinckneyville, Illinois, town constable.

In retrospect, Sam Hildebrand's story offer the historian a glimpse of reality. Behind the well known figures of the Civil War stands the common individual. Hildebrand's experiences are by no means unique; the

³⁸Official Records, Part 2, Volume 48, Series I, 207.

³⁹Hildebrand, 281.

Civil War had many Sam Hildebrands. To consider that Hildebrand is a cut-throat is a given; his actions support this judgement. Yet, Hildebrand was himself a victim of the war; he gained nothing and lost everything because of it. Most of all, Hildebrand's story provides a useful example of what can happen when basic, civil procedures break down. In many ways, the Civil War was one of the dismal periods of American History.

APPENDIX

These individual recollections of Hildebrand vary in temperament depending on that person's contact with him. Yet, they offer a contemporary view of Hildebrand that is the most unbiased. The correspondence bellow comes from a Union Home Guard officer. The Captains Gregg and McGahen mentioned in the letter were members of the Big River Mills Vigilante Committee. This letter tends to confirm the personal nature of the fighting between Hildebrand and the local Union forces. Please note colloquial spellings and punctuation have been left as found.

Transcribed version of letter from J. Kellerman, Adjutant Provost Marshal, Potosi, MO March 29, 1863 to G. G. Allen, Provost Marshal, St. Louis Dist.

Yesterday evening Sam. Hildebrant came with six men into St Francis
County robbed John Hodges store and not finding powder & caps and lead,
he went to John Beans store and robbed it. He declared he would shoot
Davis and Christian/ two Union men/ before morning. the runner who
brought in the information says that they heard about 10 pm three shots
fired and they think he created his threat.

As soon as Capt. Gregg heard of him being in he gathered all the men he could about 40 but (they) would not get up with him. the last trace they had of him he was getting out between Farmington and Pilot Knob. Genl. McGarmish Militia at Mineral Point telegraphed to Pilot Knob and Fredricktown to sen scouts out but I doubt very much they will come up with him. Capt. Gregg of the Militia spent the whole of last summer with

Rail Road) without any remuneration trying to get a hold of him. they shot Roan(,) two brothers of Hildebrand and 6 or 8 others of his gang but never would get this Samuel Hildebrant although they grazed him twice pretty closely and wounded him once. He knows the woods so well that hardly anybody else but Capt. Gregg will be able to ketch up with him. He shot last year in the harvest field the only son of McIlvain and killed many other Union men. He rode up yesterday evening to John Hiley's house and called him out and set a double barile shot gun upon breast, ordering him to open the store. John Hiley was one of a vigilance committee who were (until) last year to get hold of him. He told Hiley that he would shot Lieut. McGahen who was here fortunately in Potosi. Franklin Murphy and I.D. Sharp, McGahen and many other wealthy Union men who were compelled last summer to away for security (and) had only returned this spring and are now again frightened and will abandon their crops and every thing, because they know that Hildebrand declared he will never stop until he had every one's life(.) He is one of the most blood thirsty rebels in the country. the poorer class of Union men who are bound to their places by circumstances declare that if another Union man's blood is shed they will retaliate upon the secessionists

After mature consultations with Capt. Gregg he asked me to submit to you the proposition that he and McGahen of the Militia would undertake to bring his scalp if you would give him 10 men armed each with three revolvers so that they can be concealed and the necessary written authorization to the different commanders south and east if Pilot Knob wherever he may find them to get rations and the necessary help, if he should need any. He proposes to spread the repport that they are affraid to stay any longer and join the Union army, which will emboldier Hildebrand

right off to get in here because Gregg and McGahan are the only men he fears. Gregg will report him self in St. Louis to you for orders and then take with his men steamboat to Cape Girardeau. Hildebrand's family moved last year in the Mingo swamp west of the Cape. there is where Capt. Gregg wants to get on his track and then bush wack him regarly north until he comes up with him even if it should take him a month. If this Samuel Hildebrand is killed St. Francis County is safe.

I hope you will give this proposition your consideration and (unreadable).

Yours Most Respectfully,

J. Kellerman,
Commanding,
Adjuts. Prov. Mar.

Potosi Mar 29/63

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