

CHAPTER 4

The “Man Eater” and Other Northeast Texas Desperadoes

In 1865, shortly after the war, the United States Army assigned Lt. Col. George A. Custer to a command that included Northeast Texas. He and his subordinates had some knowledge about Lee and other desperadoes. Custer’s cavalry patrol leaders noted that—already at an early date—in Northeast Texas ruffians had organized guerrilla bands and had no fear of Union troops who were trying but failing to reestablish law and order. According to Custer, the raiders ambushed patrols and robbed wagon trains, while sheriffs and judges loyal to the Southern ideal protected the gang members. Custer added that many men in the public-at-large also protected the raiders, perhaps because such men claimed that they represented the Lost Cause. The colonel further believed that three renegade holdouts were the most dangerous of the ruffians and that they formed an unholy triumvirate: Cullen Montgomery Baker, Benjamin F. Bickerstaff, and Bob Lee. Custer believed that the outlaws sometimes joined each other for nefarious purposes. He was correct. Further, families close to the Lees had relatives in Freestone, Limestone, and Navarro counties who were involved in attacks on army personnel, civilian Unionists, and the freedmen.¹

According to one Freedmen’s Bureau agent, Lee, Baker, and Bickerstaff represented the continuing Southern resistance and the refusal of the Rebels to accept the results of the late war, making the implementation of Reconstruction laws and new ideals more difficult to enforce. The outlaws cared nothing for life, nothing for the law, and nothing for the stability of their region. Death and destruction characterized their world, one that they, themselves, made. Another bureau man added other renegade holdouts to the list: Jack English, Dick Johnson, and Simp Dixon, the latter two belonging to the Lee partisans in the Corners’ counties.²

By the winter of 1865–1866, while Peacock gave food to blacks and helped them survive the cold, Bob Lee was attracting more attention. In Bonham, loyal Union men raised the American flag when he and his friends were in the town at a local saloon getting drunk and celebrating their misspent lives. When he learned of the doings outside, Lee became enraged as did his men, all of whom got ready for a fight by checking their guns. Lee refused to let the local Union men have their small victory. Instead, backed by the guns of his friends, Lee

stumbled out of the saloon, staggered to the flag, lowered it, and personally tore it to shreds while engaging in a verbal harangue against the United States government and anyone who supported it. Outnumbered Union men could do nothing. Further, the local civil authorities, most Southern adherents, did not have the nerve nor the inclination to arrest any of the Lee bunch who, again, could afford to be defiant because of their superior numbers. A short time later, Lee ventured into Wise County, pursuing a Unionist whom he had marked as his enemy. While there, he found and murdered the man.³

In addition to his other criminal actions, Lee kidnapped a young black boy near the end of Civil War and enslaved him. When Lee returned to Texas, he forced the boy to come with him. Like many whites in Texas, Lee refused to free the child on Juneteenth; rather, he held the young boy in bondage until July of 1866. Further, the Lee family men contracted with some of the new freedmen to work Lee land. After crops were in, the Lees' refused to give their laborers their share of the harvest. Lee intimidated his workers and forced them to continue working for the family without receiving crop shares or wages. In effect, Bob Lee held them unlawfully in a situation much like slavery. The Freedmen's Bureau agent for Hunt County Hardin Hart (noted Unionist and later a district judge) learned of Lee's refusal to obey the terms of the contracts and his refusal to let the workers go. Hart also learned of the kidnapped youngster after which the bureau man led a small detachment of the Twenty-sixth United States Infantry to arrest Lee and liberate his workers, including the child. The detachment secured the release of the trapped blacks, but Lee drew two revolvers and put up a fight, firing his weapons while screaming that he would kill Hart. Outnumbered, Lee quickly took flight and avoided arrest. Forever after, he was a fugitive from justice, a fugitive who hated Hardin Hart for the rest of his life. Later, Lee and his men tried repeatedly to ambush and kill Hart. Lee simply refused to accept the outcome of the Civil War and the end of slavery. He also hated the people who abolished the South's "peculiar institution," especially the Union occupying forces and white Texas Unionists. Likewise, he believed in white supremacy and had no sympathy for or mercy upon the newly freed slaves. Like many other whites, he intended to rule the freedmen in Corners Country and in all other places he happened to find himself. If blacks did not submit to him, their lives were forfeit.⁴

Lee had trouble with more people than Hardin Hart. In the summer of 1866, Bob pilfered the goods of a Unionist, and authorities in Fannin County issued a warrant for his arrest on the charge of theft; thereafter, Lee spent much time in hiding. A renegade on the run from the law, Lee refused to give up, refused to let the late war end. He was determined to out-wit and out-shoot his foes, including Lewis Peacock who condemned Lee's outrages. Lewis knew the

people of the Corners and knew that chaos would soon erupt. He also knew that he was the only person in the area who could effectively lead those who prayed for peace.⁵

Now a wanted man, Lee went into hiding and sometimes stayed at Joel Webb's house located on "Webb Hill" in Hunt County. During the late summer of 1866, nine-year-old Pauline Wilson traveled by horse and buggy to Webb Hill to visit Joel Webb's daughters, Lutie and Mattie. After the three girls conversed and played on the porch for a time, one of the Webb girls asked in hushed tones if Pauline would like to meet Bob Lee. Pauline later recalled that "I was delighted. I was about nine years old. He was Bob Lee, the hero to some[,] and Bob Lee, the desperado[,] to others."⁶ All three girls went down to the end of the porch, and one of the Webbs knocked on a door. Presently, the door opened, and there stood the fugitive. He had a handsome, agreeable face, to hear Pauline tell it. According to W. Walworth Harrison, local historian of Hunt County: "Joel Webb was obviously harboring Bob Lee at this time[,] and Lee had probably been using Black Cat Thicket, south of Webb Hill, as a hiding place."⁷

While the outlaw was on the run, significant political events occurred. In the summer of 1866, the state was still in the hands of those who had lost the war. The former Confederates were flying high, very much in control of the state. That year the legislature passed the infamous "Black Codes" to control the freedmen and to reduce them to semi-slavery and economic peonage. In the governor's race, conservative James W. Throckmorton, once a high-ranking Confederate officer, defeated the Unionist Elisha M. Pease by an overwhelming majority in the election of 1866. The governor's chair was thus occupied by someone sympathetic to Dixie's Lost Cause. Southern loyalists also controlled both houses of the Texas legislature. Lee, then, did not begin his fight just to save the Lost Cause. He had come home a deserter and a renegade who had committed violence before the war and who was disposed to continue on that path. Yet, he also viewed himself as loyal to the South's cause. As for Throckmorton, the new governor did nothing to aid hard-pressed freedmen and their white Unionist allies. Indeed, Throckmorton even denied that those two groups had reason to complain. He accused Union loyalists and Yankee soldiers of spinning falsehoods. He wanted the Freedmen's Bureau dismantled, for its agents had documented that hundreds if not thousands of blacks had been murdered by whites in the immediate postwar years.⁸

About the governor's attitude and his failure to enforce law and order and therefore to let chaos reign, Gen. Phillip Sheridan said that the condition of freedmen and white Unionists in the remote, rural areas of the state was "truly horrible." He told Gen. Ulysses S. Grant as much, saying that "the [American]

Government is denounced, the Freedmen are shot, and Union men are persecuted."⁹ Sheridan also wrote Throckmorton, charging that "there are more casualties occurring from outrages perpetrated upon Union men and freedmen in the interior of the state than occur from Indian depredations on the frontier." The general next accused the governor of refusing to enforce the law when the only victims were white and black Unionists. In answering Sheridan's charges, the governor denied that any problems existed, while calling Unionists a "howling crowd of canting, lying scamps." Throckmorton's response led John L. Haynes of the Texas Loyal League to condemn the governor, charging that "whilst red handed murder stalks abroad in every county in the state, there he [Throckmorton] sits at Austin like an old hen on a bad egg, clucking away about only an 'occasional crime.'"¹⁰ Meanwhile, Peacock and other Unionists in the Corners could but wish that they had some protection from the authorities.

In addition to a government that was favorable to the South's antebellum ideals, the Freedmen's Bureau had not established many stations in Texas, nor had the Union military established many posts. Certainly, the Corners Country was isolated, having no military or bureau presence. That development would only come later. Although he had no justifiable reason to take on the authorities in 1865 and 1866, Lee had already become known as a lawbreaker and as one of Texas's premier "nigger killers." That attracted the attention of the authorities even before Republicans took control in 1869. People in Northeast Texas could have believed that Lee had gone over the edge. Indeed, Unionists and Confederates, alike, came to call him the "Man Eater," thus attesting to his lethal nature.¹¹

General Sheridan, Haynes of the Loyal League, and others like them confirmed in their complaints that a Second Civil War was being fought. In fact, in all Southern states complaints were similar—white Unionists and freedmen being killed out-of-hand, along with implementations of Black Codes that shackled African Americans with semi-slavery and along with the rise of terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan.¹²

Such complaints prompted national Republicans to seize control of Reconstruction and implement a reform plan that included giving military commanders the authority to remove hostile, unreconstructed civilian officials. For one, Sheridan wasted no time. He removed Throckmorton as an impediment to Reconstruction in July of 1867 and named the Union-friendly ex-Governor Elisha M. Pease to take his place. By the end of November, Sheridan had also removed thirteen of seventeen district judges, while another ex-Confederate judge resigned just prior to his certain removal. Peacock and other Unionists in the Corners applauded Sheridan's decision to clean out a good number of the former Confederates.¹³

The political shake-up affected Lee not at all, except that it gave him a grand excuse to continue his violent attacks on the black and the white Unionists in the Corners. He could now posture as a faithful Southerner trying to uphold the Lost Cause, protect white womanhood, and win the Second Civil War. He continued his violent activities that he had begun when the state and county governments were favorable to those of his sort. A local historian claimed that Lee led a band of “young hellions” who robbed travelers and highjacked freight wagons on the road to Jefferson, then the major commercially driven center in East Texas. They also rustled cattle and horses. The historian added that during Reconstruction Lee and his guerrillas killed freedmen and white Unionists practically for sport. Army Lt. H. E. Scott added that Lee and his minions “lived in open defiance of the law.” Civil authorities, the lieutenant added, did not have the “nerve to attempt to arrest them.”¹⁴ Yet, Lee and his supporters were more than common outlaws; they continued to discriminate whenever they listed their targets, and they never attacked people loyal to slave-holding Dixie.

In late 1866 and early 1867, Lee continued to attract more notice and came to the attention of United States President Andrew Johnson. The president knew about all the violence in Northeast Texas and attributed most of it to leadership coming out of Lee Station, about three miles from present Leonard. Johnson’s reference to the Corners’ Lee family was obvious. That Bob had come to the attention of the sitting president was astounding, for Texas was a long way from Washington, D.C., and Corners Country was only a small, remote, isolated area of the Lone Star State. According to one source, President Johnson averred that in Texas the Civil War had not ended. He was correct. The war still raged and would continue to do so unless law and order could be reestablished in East-Northeast Texas. Lewis Peacock’s leadership was much needed if Unionism was going to live. He redoubled his efforts to monitor the Lee bunch and to offer help to any white Unionists and freedmen who asked for assistance.¹⁵

By early 1867, Freedmen’s Bureau Sub-Assistant Commissioner DeWitt C. Brown was stationed in Paris, Lamar County, and he had a farm in Fannin County where he spent part of his time. He was well qualified to testify about the chaos of the Corners counties. Brown reported that all of Northeast Texas was out of control, that the area was home to some of the state’s worst characters. Civil officers could not maintain law and order. Mrs. L. E. Potts of Paris confirmed that Brown was correct. In an open letter to Congress, she described the pitiful condition of freedmen in the region. In addition to the Ku Klux Klan, outlaw gangs roamed the area, committing violence against blacks before running to hide out in another place where they used aliases to confuse authorities. Along the way, the raiders were helped by whites with Southern sympathies or by whites who had been terrorized by the gangs and were afraid to inform the

authorities about the outlaws' whereabouts. Many such people were probably afraid *not* to help outlaws and Klansmen for fear that they would be attacked next. Bob Lee and Elijah Clark, for example, murdered the Unionist Wiley Tabor in Farmersville, Collin County, in April of 1867, but authorities were powerless to arrest the desperadoes who were housed and protected by area whites. In August of that year, Lee also attacked army commissary wagon trains and seized United States mailbags along with many other items. Lieutenant Thomas Tolman, who would later be a leader of "Chaffee's Guerrillas"—a military unit that hounded Lee and other malefactors—led a scout into Corners Country to dog Lee. With Tolman giving the orders, the troopers staged the first of their several raids on Lee's home. There Tolman discovered two of the mailbags with the locks broken and their contents rifled and partially removed. He also found other property taken from the wagon train, but Tolman's quarry, the "Man Eater," was nowhere in sight.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Bureau Agent Brown identified the most notorious of the raiders. According to him, the worst were Bob Lee, Cullen Montgomery Baker, Benjamin F. Bickerstaff, Ben Griffith, Elisha Guest, Dick Johnson, Sam (Simp) Dixon, and George "Indian Bill" English. On another occasion, Brown amended his list to include Henry Farrar, John Henderson, and John "Pomp" Duty. Brown said that English, for example, boasted of killing many freedmen, white Unionists, and Northern soldiers. Mostly roaming in Titus County near Mount Pleasant but also seen frequently in the Corners in the company of Bob Lee, English once had the pleasure of allowing a soldier to buy him a drink while the federal explained that he had been sent to Mount Pleasant to arrest George English. After the Yankee asked if English knew the man, the badman introduced himself before casually shooting the questioner to death. When English killed blacks, he sometimes flayed them and nailed their skins to trees. In addition to English and the rest, Brown could have included the name of the young teenager John Wesley Hardin on his list, for Hardin was also active in the Corners' area and was helping his kinsman Bob Lee. Further, guerrilla leaders like Lee, Baker, and Bickerstaff frequently acted in concert, a development that swelled their ranks. When they worked together, they often had numerical superiority over the Yankees and area Unionists like Peacock whom they bedeviled.¹⁷

Brown was accurate when he named Baker and Bickerstaff as comrades of Lee. Both Baker and Bickerstaff led guerrilla bands during and after the war, and both were staunch Lee friends. The former, a native of Tennessee born in 1835, came to Cass County in 1839 with his parents. As he grew into his teenage years, he became a bully. In 1854 he flogged a younger boy, an orphan named Stallcup, almost whipping the boy to death. Later, authorities arrested Baker who was tried and convicted of assault. Area farmer Wesley Bailey, fifty-two years old, bravely

served as the chief witness at the trial. The same day that Baker paid his fine, he got even. He went to Bailey's farm and murdered the old man as he was coming out of his barn where he had just finished feeding his horses. When Bailey walked out into his yard, Baker cut loose with a double-barreled shotgun, even as the old farmer begged for his life.¹⁸

Earlier, Baker had been just a troublesome pest who occasionally hurt others, "but by shooting Bailey, he had crossed the line dividing mean from criminal."¹⁹ Baker made Boston, Bowie County, his headquarters from whence he periodically conducted raids and spread terror throughout Northeast Texas and Southwestern Arkansas. Baker and his men robbed Union supply trains, killing federals in the process. Baker also became known as another of the "nigger killers" who intended to keep blacks in their place. Whenever he was in Corners Country, he found Lee and rode with him.²⁰

William P. "Bill" Longley, another noted teenage criminal who was sometimes called "Wild Bill," probably rode with Baker for a time. Born on October 16, 1851, in Mill Creek, Austin County, young Longley first attracted the attention of authorities when he killed a black soldier. Using the Lost Cause and the supposed excesses of Reconstruction as his excuse, he was soon committing more crimes, including thefts and murders. Finally on the run, Longley—still not much more than a boy—headed north where he found and joined Baker's gang. Later, after Baker's death, some sources hold that Longley joined Lee's wild bunch.²¹

Born on a farm in Titus County, Bickerstaff also became a Lee friend and a terror who punished freedmen and white Unionists. In the words of former slave Lee Pierce, Bickerstaff was "one of the main leaders of the [ex-Confederate] whites. They [Bickerstaff and members of his gang] killed several of the colored militia and wounded lots more."²² Like Baker, he roamed all of Northeast Texas and often cooperated with Lee and his men. Having fought as a guerrilla during the war, Bickerstaff was most proficient with arms. He came to the attention of the regional authorities in 1865 when he was returning home after the Civil War. A hater of the free blacks, he murdered a former slave when he was passing through Louisiana headed for his home in Titus County. Now on the wrong side of the law, he became a man determined to resist the Reconstruction process and refused to tolerate the new freedom of the ex-slaves. He became known as a Southern hotspur who would shoot first and ask questions later. In the first few months after his return, Bickerstaff murdered several blacks in the Gray Rock area. He recruited about twenty men and set up a camp in the bottoms of White Oak Creek. At some point he moved his center of operations from Titus to Hopkins County and headquartered near Sulphur Springs from whence he was often in communication with both Lee and Baker.²³

Another "nigger killer," Bickerstaff continued to rob and execute blacks. He attacked Union army supply trains and supply depots, killing Union troopers, taking what he could, and burning what he could not. He cloaked his deeds by claiming to be one of Dixie's patriots who, like Baker and Bob Lee, was willing to fight for the lost honor of the South. Despite his crimes, Bickerstaff developed a wide popular following because he cast the War of Reconstruction as a great noble struggle wherein Dixie's boys, oppressed Rebels all, were forced to do battle with evil Northerners, dastardly Southern scalawags, and the uppity freedmen who were industrious enough to try to rise above caste. For a time he got away with his depredations. As was true with Lee, Baker, and other desperadoes, Bickerstaff had supporters who helped him and his men as best they could by serving as spies, by warning them when authorities were near, by hiding them, by feeding them and their mounts, by buying guns and ammunition, and by performing whatever other services that the raiders needed.²⁴

Different observers noted that other outlaws, who joined or led gangs, also occasionally roamed about the Corners vicinity and cooperated with Lee. They included Bill Bateman, Wade Anderson, Phillip Simpson, Bill Taylor, Charlie Hodges, Bill Parrish, and Thomas Nichols. Lee knew all of them and often cooperated with them when they were in Corners Country. One Freedmen's Bureau sub-agent called the whole sorry lot "general murderers, miscellaneous robbers, and cut throats" who would "kill a freedman for 75 cents," adding that Hodges killed one black child because the boy "had his hands in his pockets and didn't stand at attention when Hodges rode past."²⁵

By 1868, then, if not earlier, various terrorists in Northeast Texas had formed a loose alliance and often helped each other. Baker, Lee, Bickerstaff, and Longley—and their men—often joined each other for nefarious purposes. More and more people reported that they were confirmed "nigger killers." By mid-1868 other sources listed the following men who conspired together: Bickerstaff, Baker, Jack and George English, Lee, and two of Lee's men—Dick Johnson and Sam (Simp) Dixon—as well as others who had recently killed six or seven white Unionists and "who roamed the Northeastern Texas countryside" and its towns without fearing "negative consequences."²⁶

Meanwhile, in the Corners the Lee bunch was becoming braver, so much so that Peacock became more concerned for the safety of all area people, black and white, who remained loyal to the federal government. Lewis also feared for his family, afraid that Emaline, John Edgar, or Cathy might become targets of vengeance. Peacock started a petition drive, asking for the commander at Sherman to send some troops to Pilot Grove to police Corners Country. Joined by Maddox, Nance, and others, Lewis delivered the petition to Lieutenant H. E. Scott, who commanded the small post at Sherman. In part, the petition pointed

out that the area's white Unionists and freedmen were afraid to work their fields for fear of outlaw or Klan raids. Some people had even started staying away from their homes at night. They hid and slept in the nearest woods. Peacock was among their number. Yet, he stayed close enough to his house to guard it, lest Lee and his men tried to harm Emaline or John Edgar.²⁷

By the fall of 1868, Scott complied with Lewis's request by sending a small detachment commanded by Cpl. Frederick Herold to Pilot Grove. Area Unionists led by Peacock greeted the men when they arrived and briefed the corporal about all the doings in the Corners, especially the actions of the Lee guerrillas. Somewhat later, the criminal activities of Lee and other brigands became national news. On September 29, 1868, the *New York Tribune* attached a name to the roaming bands who loosely associated together, the *Tribune's* editor calling them the "New Rebellion Gang." The *Tribune* reported that "for some time past the Eastern portion of the State [of Texas] has been infested by a number of bands of reckless outlaws whose principal occupation seems to be to kill defenseless and unoffending Union men and industrious [N]egroes." Led by men like Lee, Bickerstaff, and Baker, the gangs had "become a terror to law and order loving people" in East-Northeast Texas.²⁸

Again, Lee—along with some of his relatives and some of his friends—was named as a prominent leader of Southern malefactors. Other sources also referred to the "Second Rebellion," naming the same group of young guns. Calling themselves the Ku Klux Klan, they roamed far and wide, committing more atrocities on freedmen and white Unionists. Some of the outlaws often worked as enforcers for the landed elite if they had trouble with their workforce. The *Tribune* said that at other times the raiders' actions appeared to be random, but close examination proved otherwise. They continued to exempt most die-hard Southerners from their violence and leave them in peace. A *Tribune* correspondent confirmed what a bureau agent had said earlier: The gang members would "kill a black for 75 cents." Yet, the brigands could not be apprehended because their white supporters always informed them of danger whenever soldiers or cooperating Texas Unionists were near: "Fed, secreted, and encouraged by a large number of people throughout the country," the desperadoes foiled the authorities "in every attempt at their capture." Northeast Texas was "in a terrible condition; the people evince a spirit of lawlessness and resistance to civil law, and only await [other opportunities to commit mayhem]. Law and order ceased to exist" and men like Lee were "cold blooded assassins" who "murdered men, women, and children."²⁹ Of course, Lewis Peacock already knew all that, and he did his best to keep military authorities abreast of the latest news from the Corners.

As if to prove that the *Tribune's* assessment about the "Texas Troubles" was correct, one bureau agent trying to catch Baker simply gave up because the man

had too much support and was most effective in controlling area blacks.³⁰ Observers often mentioned the outlaws and various terrorist groups in the same breath—and with good reason, for all of East Texas felt the sting of both groups whose memberships often overlapped.

The birth of the historic Ku Klux Klan took place in Pulaski County, Tennessee, in May or early June of 1866. Founded by Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Klan was originally a social club for the area’s Southern military veterans, its meetings including elaborate initiation ceremonies, other rituals, and grand-sounding titles to make the members feel important. Copied by other counties in Tennessee, the different Klans evolved into terrorist groups that intended to control the new freedmen politically, economically, and socially. By July there were Klaverns all over Tennessee, their members persecuting white Unionists and blacks. Even the social club in Pulaski evolved into a terrorist society, despite General Forrest’s effort to disband it because he could not tolerate the violence. Such groups swept the entire South between 1866 and 1867. There was, however, some confusion about identifying Klan groups, for not all went by the same name, and each group, usually organized at the county level, was autonomous.³¹

Actually, terrorist groups were organizing in Texas by mid- 1865, well before Forrest established his organization in Tennessee. That year, Col. George Custer’s command included East-Northeast Texas, and he and his men confirmed that violent groups were springing up. The colonel told of a “Brotherhood” of whites in Freestone County that had coalesced. Its members collectively promised to drive all blacks out of their county. Despite the illogic of attacking their major labor force, the entire brotherhood swore not to allow ex-slaves to be employed in Freestone; to whip any blacks who tried to contract with whites; and to whip any whites who employed African Americans. Likewise, the *New Orleans Tribune* reported that in 1865 terrorists were already organizing in the Lone Star State well before the Klans in Tennessee.³²

In Texas, terrorists groups variously named themselves the Ku Klux Rangers, the Knights of the White Camellia, the White Caps, Knights of the Red Hand, the Sons of Washington, the Knights of the Rising Son, the Teutonic Brotherhood, and so on. To further confuse the story of the expanding Klans, some observers—including newspaper editors and military men like Custer—at first labeled the terrorist groups the Knights of the Golden Circle (KGC), a secret antebellum pro-Southern organization that wanted to expand bondage into Central and South America and therefore to create an empire for slavery. The KGC also helped to spearhead the drive for secession and then to organize the first of the South’s military units. Yet editors like those of the *New Orleans Tribune*, who reported that the KGC was re-arming in Texas and holding open meetings in most towns of the state, only erred about the name. The editors were

correct about the new groups organizing and spreading chaos and death in their wake. Some contemporaries and later historians have credited Col. Roger Q. Mills, Confederate to the core, as the Klan leader who coordinated terrorist activity in Texas, but most of the groups operated at the county level and were autonomous. However, many such organizations cooperated with Klans in adjacent counties to spread more terror.³³

Lee and the other brigands organized Klans in their region or joined when they learned of a Klan nearby. They also did Klan work in terrorizing the freed-people to render them docile and to reinforce white supremacy. In his 1971 book on terrorism in the South, Allan Trelease counted Klans in some seventeen counties in Texas, but his report represented a monumental undercount. Later, researcher Barbara Clayton Barnhill found activity in almost eighty counties, including units in all the Corners counties and in most of the other counties in Northeast Texas as well. As early as 1866, a Klavern called McKinney, Collin County, home—a home that was dangerously close to the Corners. Its founder R. D. Allison, a veteran of both the Mexican War and the Civil War, visited Klaverns in the Volunteer State and secured a “model charter” from Pulaski. The Collin County Klavern soon attracted 200 members. By 1868 the three other counties that made up the Corners Country had Klans centered in Sherman, Greenville, and Bonham. Yet other nearby locales that had Klaverns included: Paris, Lamar County; Sulphur Springs, Hopkins County; Dallas, Dallas County; Kaufman, Kaufman County; Canton, Van Zandt County; Quitman, Wood County; Mount Pleasant, Titus County; Clarksville, Red River County; and Boston, Bowie County. Most renegades like Lee, Baker, Bickerstaff, and others were either leaders of Klansmen or cooperated closely with the terrorist groups. Baker probably joined the Klan in his area, while Bickerstaff was the head of the Klan in Hopkins County. Lee headed the Klansmen who lived in the Corners. Occasionally, he even marked his horse with a large “K” on both flanks. As late as 1868 sympathetic news sheets denied that terrorist groups existed. Instead the Loyal League was only playing political tricks.³⁴

Men like Peacock knew different. Given his intelligence network among freed blacks, he learned early on about the Klan groups and understood just how dangerous they were. Yet, it was hard for Lewis to keep up with all the doings of violent men in Corners Country, for their crimes appeared to be legion. Lieutenant A. G. Malloy confirmed that many white supporters assisted Klansmen and outlaws like Baker, Bickerstaff, and Lee because they claimed they represented Dixie’s Lost Cause. They were most useful in helping whites “control their freedmen and [do] not hesitate to shoot them on the slightest complaint made by their employers.”³⁵ Another observer added that area whites cheated freedmen

out of wages or their crop shares and mobbed them if they complained: "Civil law is a farce. . . . Freedmen have no chance for justice."³⁶ Yet another person reported that the blacks were not paid for their labor and that some were still held in semi-slavery. Some remained slaves as late as 1868, and murders of the freedmen were common while the perpetrators went unpunished.³⁷

One historian listed the reported reasons why terrorists and outlaws killed blacks: "[F]reedman did not remove his hat when he passed him [a white man]; Negro would not allow himself to be whipped; freedman would not allow his wife to be whipped; he was carrying a letter to a Freedmen's Bureau official; kill Negroes to see them kick; wanted to thin out niggers a little; didn't hand over his money quick enough; wouldn't give up his whiskey flask."³⁸

To make himself appear as a champion of the Lost Cause, Lee concocted an amazing story in 1868 which was published by the *Bonham News* of Fannin County on June 26. In it the captain related that in 1865, shortly after his heroic return from the war, Peacock and his men, wearing U.S. Army uniforms, arrested him in his home when he was sick and defenseless. Claiming that they were taking him to Sherman to stand trial for war crimes, they instead stopped in mid-route and went into the thicket in Choctaw Bottom. For thirty-six hours they detained him there. Finally one of the members of the posse explained to Lee that he could buy his way out of trouble. Lee then gave the posse his mule, saddle, and bridle along with a \$20 gold piece in his pockets and signed a \$2,000 note payable on demand. According to his account, upon being freed he went to Bonham and filed suit against his foes. However, a search of Fannin County courthouse records proved that Lee had lied about the entire incident.³⁹

Many freedmen and white Unionists hoped that the army and the Freedmen's Bureau agents would protect them, but by 1868 federal forces in Texas had been reduced to 3,770 men who served at thirty-seven posts. The army stationed most of the men in West Texas on the Indian frontier. Only 1,291 of the men manned the nineteen interior garrisons which were east of the frontier. On the average, the interior garrisons did not even have company strength. Further, many garrisons were manned by infantrymen who were of little use because the more mobile Klansmen and outlaws usually had good mounts. Plus, as mentioned, the Freedmen's Bureau was so woefully undermanned and underfunded that it could not reach all areas of East and Northeast Texas. At the peak of its expansion in 1867, the bureau had only fifty-seven local posts and sixty-nine sub-assistant commissioners in the entire state. From ex-slaves and white Unionists, authorities continually received requests that more bureau stations be established—requests that could not be approved because of manpower and money shortages. Peacock repeatedly asked for a bureau station for Pilot Grove, but his

MURDER AND MAYHEM

wish went unfulfilled. He eventually understood that the loyalists in Corners Country would have to, in large part, depend on themselves for protection, a task made harder because of Lee's supporters.⁴⁰

Other of the Corners' area Unionists, like Peacock, did what they could to recruit men to help their cause, to aid the Freedmen's Bureau, and to extend some assistance to area blacks. But Life in the Corners would soon explode into a nightmare for those Unionists.