

## DECISION AT PRYOR CREEK

The morning of September 19, 1864 dawned and they had done it! The Confederates had avenged their defeat at the first battle of Cabin Creek the previous September and, not only won, but captured badly needed supplies. Caught in a pincer move early in the morning between Stand Watie's cavalry on the north and Richard Gano's cannon and troops on the south, Union soldiers had fled in panic. Many of the 300 wagons bound for Fort Gibson had been destroyed. But when order was restored, the victorious rebels had pieced together one hundred and thirty wagons, loaded them with clothes, food and ammunition, then rounded up 740 mules to pull them. At the time, the booty was estimated to be worth more than a million dollars.

To add to this victory, two days earlier when they were traveling north to do battle, 2,200 strong, Watie and Gano's force had stumbled onto a small detachment of Union troops engaged in a hay cutting operation near Flat Rock Creek. The 125 troops included members of the Union's 2<sup>nd</sup> Kansas Cavalry and the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Colored Infantry, both of whom had participated in the Union victory at the first battle. Outnumbered 20 to 1 by the vengeful Confederates, the ensuing slaughter was brief and bloody. When the outcome was evident, mounted members of the Union cavalry fled, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. Few were taken prisoners and 73 were killed, even when attempting to surrender.

Following the command to "mount up" at Cabin Creek after the battle on the 19<sup>th</sup>, the procession of wagons, cavalry and foot soldiers followed the Military Road south. But the danger to the wagon train was not over. Reaching Pryor Creek about 11:30 a.m., an advanced contingent of Confederates encountered a strong force of Union soldiers marching north from Fort Gibson to meet the wagon train. Ironically, the Union troops were led by Colonel James Williams, who commanded negro troops in the earlier victory at Cabin Creek, and now was leading the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry. In addition, Williams' forces included a battery of Parrott Rifles, the cannon of choice for both north and south, highly accurate within a range of 2000 yards. That was the "good news" on the Union side of the battleground ledger. The "bad news" was that the troops had made a forced march in 46 hours from Fort Gibson to Pryor Creek, marching on the double quick. After the war a survivor, Corporal Allen Lynch of the Kansas 1<sup>st</sup>, stated, "it was the longest walk I ever took."

Unlimbering their cannons the afternoon of September 19<sup>th</sup>, both sides engaged in a long range duel lasting until nearly dark. After their long marches, troops on both sides were neither in condition nor in a frame of mind to fight, nor would they. Colonel Williams' men bivouacked in combat formation on the field southeast of today's Pryor, waiting for the coming conflict. But Confederate commanders had other plans. Concerned about losing some, perhaps all of the wagon train and its supplies, Generals' Watie and Gano deployed their troops on a ridge in full view of the Union line to impress the Yankees with their numbers, then initiated a plan to withdraw the wagons. Lighting fires along the ridge that would indicate troops were encamped, the commanders also ordered that a wagon be driven back and forth out of site making noise to assure the enemy of their presence. When

night fell, the Confederates quietly withdrew, first the wagon train, followed by the troops. Moving generally southwest and fording the Verdigris River near today's Claremore the following morning, the wagon train safely crossed the Arkansas just north of the 11<sup>th</sup> street bridge in Tulsa. At first light on September 20th, Colonel Williams soon discovered he had been duped, the rebels were not in site and it was too late for his still exhausted troops to pursue them. The withdrawal had worked perfectly.

News of the victory at Cabin Creek, the capture of a "million dollar" wagon train and the ruse at Pryor Creek was received enthusiastically in Richmond. But it would be short lived. The same day as the victory in the west, southern troops, suffering over 5000 casualties, were defeated at the Battle of Third Winchester, Virginia. And, following a series of significant losses during the next six months, the Confederate leadership was forced to cede victory to the Union in April of 1865,

Obtaining sufficient supplies from the southern government for the war in Indian Territory had always been difficult for Confederate commanders. So, perhaps still savoring their success at Second Cabin Creek, the rebels in Indian Territory were not immediately convinced that their cause was lost. But eventually reality dictated otherwise, and on June 23, 1865 representing southern forces in Indian Territory, General Stand Watie formally surrendered. The Civil war in the west was officially ended, but peace in this region was still years away.



