

CABIN CREEK, MORE THAN A BATTLEFIELD

On September 28th and Saturday the 29th, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., the Oklahoma Historical Society and Friends of Cabin Creek will host a living history event at the battle site, three miles north of Pensacola. The Friday program will focus on students and teachers, Saturday will be open to the general public. Historians will be available to discuss a myriad of subjects relevant to the historical period and the battlefield.

Most citizens of northeastern Oklahoma are familiar with the fact that two Civil War battles were fought at the Cabin Creek crossing of the Military Road in today's Mayes County. Union supply wagons from Kansas, bound for Fort Gibson, were more vulnerable to attack at that point than any other on the one hundred mile gauntlet through Indian Territory. However, in addition to two battles, it was also the site of other significant historical factors; headquarters for the largest ranch in Indian Territory and one of the largest ever in Oklahoma; site of the first battle involving African American and white troops; and evidence that General Stand Watie, a citizen soldier long adept at guerilla warfare, had evolved into a military strategist. There is even the probability that it was the site of Planche Cabin Creek, a cabin remarkable for having been built of planks instead of logs, mentioned in a report by surveyor Isaac McCoy in 1829.

In 1840, the site at Cabin Creek was chosen by twenty year old Joseph Martin to be headquarters for, what would become, a ranch sprawling over one hundred thousand acres from today's Ketchum to Salina. Over the next twenty years, Martin, who dubbed the ranch "Pensacola," proceeded to amass a fortune from his empire. Acquiring over one hundred slaves to manage the ranch, Martin also took advantage of his location astride the Military Road to provide provisions and to repair the wagons of thousands of immigrants traveling to Texas and beyond. In addition to Pensacola, Martin who was frequently called "Greenbriar Joe," also added a second plantation near the southwestern boundary of his vast ranch that he named Greenbriar. The fact that Martin, a Cherokee, was able to build a dynasty in the wilderness long before statehood, as well as the complex of buildings he constructed, should be recognized as part of the history of Cabin Creek crossing.

Civil War historians frequently marginalize or ignore events and clashes that occurred in the Trans-Mississippi region during the Civil War. Explicit details are written about eastern battles and the enormous casualties that resulted. One bit of misinformation pertains to the first battle involving African American and white Confederate troops. Epitomized in the 1990 release of the film "Glory," starring academy award winner Denzel Washington, viewers would be lead to believe that the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was the first to encounter white soldiers at Fort Wagner, South Carolina. In fact it was the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment. The 54th was organized in February of 1863, the First Kansas the previous month on January 13th. After being mustered in, the First Kansas skirmished with Confederates at Sherwood, Missouri, May 18, 1863, then clashed in full battle with Watie's troops at Cabin Creek on July 1st and 2nd. Ordered to plunge into the swollen waters of Cabin Creek by their commander, Colonel James Williams, survivors said the creek turned red with the blood of the dead and wounded.

Meanwhile, June 3, 1863, the 54th was just debarking from ships at Hilton Head, South Carolina and wouldn't fight the battle at Fort Wagner, for which they became renown, until July 18th. The heroics of African Americans, members of the First Kansas, need to be underscored by any event held at Cabin Creek.

And finally, mention needs to be made regarding the transformation of General Stand Watie from a "hit and run" guerilla leader to a military strategist. During the first battle, Watie proceeded to engage Union troops, even though half of his force under command of William Cabell were unavailable, delayed by flood waters on the Grand River. He was badly defeated. However, the second battle involved a pincer move with Watie's troops on the left, General Richard Gano's cavalry on the right and Howell's Texas cannon battery in the middle, a master piece of warfare. In addition to defeating Union troops, one hundred seventy supply wagons were captured, valued at 1.5 million dollars, provisions enabling Watie to become the last Confederate general to surrender at the end of the war.

Over the years, numerous events have been conducted recognizing the battle site. In 1965, the United Daughters of the Confederacy purchased and donated ten acres to the Oklahoma Historical Society and, in 2011 the Civil War Trust purchased ninety more, essentially covering the area that defines the first battle. Several commemorative events have been held. In 1984 the hundredth anniversary of the second battle featured D.E. (Bill) Martin, Joe Martin's great grandson. Since 1991, six re-enactments have been held nearby, sponsored by the Friends of Cabin Creek. Now, on September 28th and 29th, 2012 historians will be on hand to relate information about the history of Cabin Creek Crossing. In addition to the two battles, let's hope they include "the rest of the story" as it relates to this historic icon.

