

Echoes From the Past

THE DELAWARE COUNTY CIVIL WARS

Disagreements and the motivation that result in wars, particularly civil wars, are often lost in the sands of time. In what was to become Delaware County in Indian Territory two civil wars were fought simultaneously from 1861 to 1865. Both had festered for decades, one involving an internal conflict common to all Five Civilized Tribes and the other became an all encompassing war that erupted between northern and southern states.

One example which fairly describes similar disagreements within all tribes involves the Cherokee Indians and relates to the removal to Indian Territory. The strife among Cherokee's began in 1830 when the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act invoking international law "The Doctrine of Discovery" resulting in the eventual transfer of the Cherokee Nation from Georgia and Tennessee to "Indian Territory." This civil war evolved around those who resisted removal, later called "Pins" and those who were willing to sign a treaty for removal, the "Treaty Party." Earlier, a small group of Cherokees had moved to western Arkansas between 1817 and 1833 and their glowing reports may have influenced those who signed the Treaty of New Echota, After the signing some Treaty members moved west between 1835 and 1837 followed by the majority of those who opposed and were forced to come in 1838-39 via the infamous "Trail of Tears." Thus the stage was set for the start of the first Delaware County war.

Upon arrival several leaders of the Treaty Party had established homes in Delaware County, Stand Watie along Spavinaw Creek and Major Ridge and John Ridge on Honey Creek. On June 22, 1839 the Knights of Death who had vowed to wipe out Treaty leaders assassinated John Ridge. On the same day, Major Ridge was waylaid near Cane Hill on the Arkansas border and another signer, Elias Boudinot was killed near Park Hill. Forewarned, Stand Watie who was tending a store at Park Hill eluded his killers. In response, Watie gathered supporters at Fort Wayne in Delaware County to avenge the deaths and war between the two factions seemed imminent. However, cooler heads prevailed but hatred between the two factions simmered and for the next 20 years incidents of violence occurred and the power struggle to govern continued. Multiply the Cherokee example by four other tribes and the result is a complex series of inner tribal civil wars.

The "other" Civil War was initiated in the east at Fort Sumter, South Carolina on April 15, 1861 but it also created tensions among factions within the civilized tribes in the west. To compound the earlier tribal dissention some members of all tribes owned slaves or were sympathetic with the Confederate cause. Conversely, those favoring the North feared a backlash from the Federal government regarding future governing of Indian Territory or simply believed that southern secession from the Union was wrong. Again using the Cherokees as an example, John Ross the Principal Chief attempted to negotiate with both factions but eventually fled to Washington thus creating a vacuum in tribal leadership that dissidents were more than willing to fill. Again, this situation reflected circumstances in all Five Civilized Tribes and set the stage for Delaware County's second civil war, one which compounded the issue of tribal removal with disagreement about secession.

One illustration of this "second" Civil War occurred on Delaware County soil when Union and Confederate forces clashed at the battle of Cowskin Prairie northwest of Grove

Spring on July 3, 1862. In June, Confederate troops commanded by General Sterling Price had encamped east of Grove Springs to gather forage and train troops. Shortly thereafter they were joined by Stand Watie, whose forces had clashed but fled from Union soldiers at Webber Falls. The Yankees overwhelmed the Confederates who lost a considerable amount of supplies. A second battle on October 22nd saw the two forces meet again near Old Fort Wayne in Delaware County. Federal troops commanded by General James Blunt overwhelmed the Confederates with superior numbers. In each conflict tribal members fought on both sides some motivated by the issue of removal and others by secession. Over the next three years the two Civil Wars resulted in skirmishes, battles, decimation of property and death. But the battle reports of commanders never mentioned whether Indian soldiers fought for revenge or principle so their motivation has been lost in the sands of time.