

LOCUST GROVE, MORE THAN A SKIRMISH

Most historians dismiss the Union victory at Locust Grove early in the Civil War as a minor skirmish, but events following the clash indicate that it had a serious impact on the Cherokee Nation. As a result of this “skirmish,” Cherokee unity as it related to the Confederacy would be shattered. There is also a human interest story. The commanders on each side would meet twice again, and under far different circumstances.

On June 28, 1862, an expedition of 6,000 white and Indian troops under the command of Colonel William Weer, former attorney general for the state of Kansas, marched out of Baxter Springs, Kansas. Their mission was to take control of the Cherokee government and establish a Union presence in Indian Territory. Weer split his forces, taking personal command of the 9th Kansas Cavalry and the 1st Indian Home Guard and proceeded down the east side of the Grand River. The remainder of the expedition continued on the Military Road and camped on the Martin Ranch at Cabin Creek. After scattering Stand Watie’s guerillas at Spavinaw Creek on July 2nd, Weer continued south and as dawn broke the next morning, attacked a sleeping contingent of Confederate troops at Locust Grove, capturing 110 of them as well as 60 supply wagons. The Confederate commander, Colonel James Clarkson, previously an officer in the Missouri State Guard, was taken prisoner while still in his night shirt.

Rejoining his command at Cabin Creek, Weer oversaw a grand Fourth of July victory celebration, lifting his cup of adult refreshments too many times and verifying a long standing reputation. On July 10th, the Colonel moved his command south to Flat Rock Creek about 18 miles north of Fort Gibson and sent a detachment to capture Tahlequah and Park Hill. Tahlequah was taken without a shot being fired and, continuing to Park Hill, the Union troops captured Principal Chief John Ross and several hundred Confederates who promptly defected, swearing allegiance to the Union. However, this series of victories proved to be the high water mark of William Weer’s career. Back at Flat Rock Creek, he continued to indulge in his favorite beverage, totally dismissing the responsibilities of his command. After several days, exasperated subordinates finally placed him under arrest. Thus, shortly after when the expedition returned to Kansas, camping again at the Martin Ranch, the adversaries at Locust Grove met for a second time, Weer under house arrest and Clarkson, a prisoner of war.

Meanwhile, back at Park Hill John Ross, in a decision that still sparks controversy, renounced the Confederacy and declared allegiance to the Union. Earlier, he had argued against taking sides in the insurrection, but had capitulated in favor of the Confederacy. However, promises of military assistance had gone unfulfilled and the swift defeat by Union forces at Locust Grove, his capture at Park Hill and the defection of Indian Troops, convinced the disenchanted Ross he was right in the first place. He declared allegiance to the Union, but in the process rekindled bitter feelings between two factions within the tribe that involved the conditions for removal from Georgia back in the 1830s. The result was a war within a war in Cherokee territory that ultimately decimated the nation.

Fact is sometimes stranger than fiction, and the prospect of both the victor at Locust Grove, Colonel William Weer, and the vanquished Colonel James Clarkson, both under

guard, must be considered unique. Upon their arrival at Fort Leavenworth, Weer was assigned a series of minor tasks and eventually to a desk job in St Louis. Clarkson, on the other hand, became the victim of a tug-of-war between civil and military courts. Union civil officials contended he should be tried as a civilian war criminal because the Missouri State Guard, his first assignment, were regarded as renegades, not as an official military unit. However, military authorities contended he was a prisoner of war, captured as a Confederate officer at Locust Grove. Clarkson had a huge stake in the decision. The civil charges would result in a considerable prison term for treason, but as a prisoner of war he could be eligible for parole or exchange. The events and months that followed found Clarkson, still under control of civil authorities, and now incarcerated at Gratiot Street Prison in St. Louis. Discovering that William Weer, was also in St. Louis, Clarkson wrote his former captor, describing his predicament and managed to appeal to Weer's ego. The capture of Clarkson and his supply wagons had been one of the finest moments of Weer's troubled career. Weer did write the necessary letter of confirmation and, following months of bureaucratic haggling, finally on February 17, 1864, over 20 months after he was captured, Clarkson was paroled as a prisoner of war.

Although diminutive in numbers compared to many others during the war, the clash at Locust Grove had a lasting impact in Indian Territory. It may have been a minor skirmish according to historians, but with major consequences for the Cherokee Nation, coupled with a unique situation involving the opposing commanders.

Dallas, Texas – October 17/21

Wednesday, October 17 ok

Lv. Grove – Arr Sunnyvale, TX

322 miles @ 6 hrs. 36 min.

Plantation Palace RV Park

345 Barnes Bridge Road, Sunnyvale, TX 75182

(800) 820 – 4778

Thursday, October 18 ok

Friday, October 19

Saturday, October 20

Lv. Sunnyvale, TX – Arr - OKC

