

## **REGIONAL SUMMARY: NORTHWEST ARKANSAS**

**By Dr. Bill Shea**

When the Civil War began, Arkansans assumed that Missouri would join the Confederacy and serve as a buffer between Arkansas and the United States. That assumption was incorrect. The great majority of Missourians rejected secession and the state remained in the Union. Unhappy with this situation, a pro-secessionist minority led by Sterling Price formed an army and tried to make Missouri a Confederate state by force of arms. In the summer of 1861 Union forces drove Price and his army into the southwest corner of Missouri. As the fighting drew ever closer to Arkansas, nervous Confederate authorities assembled an army under General Benjamin McCulloch in the northwest corner of the state.

Hoping to prevent the fighting in Missouri from spilling over into Arkansas, McCulloch marched north to help Price hold his ground. McCulloch's strategy was initially successful. On August 10, 1861, the combined Confederate armies defeated a smaller Union army in a hard-fought battle at Wilson's Creek, just south of Springfield, Missouri.

It appeared once again that Arkansas was safe from invasion from the direction of Missouri. A few months later, however, everything changed. In January 1862 a Union army commanded by General Samuel R. Curtis pushed Price and McCulloch out of Missouri and all the way down to the Boston Mountains south of Fayetteville. During the chaotic retreat across northwest Arkansas Confederate soldiers looted and burned much of Fayetteville. When the Union army entered the state on February 17, 1862, Curtis sent a brief telegram to President Abraham Lincoln: "The flag of our Union again floats in Arkansas."

Curtis intended to push the Confederates out of Missouri and keep them out. At this stage of the war, Union forces had no interest in invading Arkansas. Curtis halted his army at Pea Ridge, about five miles south of the Arkansas-Missouri line, and waited to see what the Confederates would do.

Meanwhile, General Earl Van Dorn arrived in the Boston Mountains to take overall command of the Confederate forces. Van Dorn was determined to recover as much of Missouri as possible. He led his army north from the Boston Mountains and attacked Curtis on March 7-8, 1862, at Pea Ridge. Van Dorn had a great advantage

because he outnumbered Curtis three to two, and on the first day of the battle the Confederates pushed the Union forces back. But McCulloch was killed and the Confederates became confused and disheartened as the fighting went on. On the second day Curtis counterattacked and drove the Confederates away in disorder. Van Dorn's shrunken army crossed the Boston Mountains and regrouped at Van Buren.

The aftermath of the battle was grim. Of the 10,250 Union troops engaged at Pea Ridge, about 1,400 were killed or wounded. The Confederate army numbered around 16,500 and lost at least 2,000 men killed, wounded, or captured. Wounded survivors of the battle faced an uncertain future. Even the best medical treatment during the Civil War was crude; medical care in a frontier state like Arkansas was primitive beyond belief. Infections, malnourishment, and exposure to harsh weather caused many sick and wounded soldiers to die.

Two small regiments of Confederate Cherokees (about 800 men in all) from the nearby Indian Territory played a minor role in the battle. One of the Cherokee regiments was led by Colonel Stand Watie, who later became the only Indian on either side to achieve the rank of general. Several hundred Confederate Creeks and Choctaws arrived too late and did not take part in the fight. As these summaries show, Indians fought in other Arkansas battles as well. (Note: The Indians who fought at Pea Ridge did NOT wear feathers or buckskins or warpaint or use bows and arrows. Like most other Confederate soldiers, they were dressed in civilian clothes—ordinary shirts, pants, and hats—and carried rifles and shotguns. Several well-known illustrations showing the Indians with feathers, etc., are completely imaginary.)

Pea Ridge was the largest Civil War battle fought in Arkansas and the most important. The Union victory insured that Missouri would remain a Union state. Pea Ridge also had enormous consequences for Arkansas. After his defeat Van Dorn abandoned Arkansas. He took what was left of his army across the Mississippi River to join another Confederate army in northern Mississippi. He also took away nearly all horses, mules, weapons, ammunition, supplies and what little machinery the state possessed. By the summer of 1862 Confederate Arkansas was almost completely defenseless.

When Curtis learned that Van Dorn was moving towards the Mississippi River, he moved his army eastward as well. His purpose, as before, was to protect Missouri. Eventually Curtis discovered that Van Dorn had left Arkansas. With Missouri out of danger, Curtis turned south and invaded Arkansas. His goal was to capture Little

Rock. (A description of this operation is found in the summary for northeast Arkansas.)

A great deal of destruction, vandalism, and theft had taken place in northwest Arkansas while the armies were present, but far worse was the breakdown of law and order after the armies departed. Deserters and stragglers from both armies and local criminals unleashed a reign of terror that grew worse with every passing month. Without the backing of state or military authorities, sheriffs and constables were killed or frightened into submission. With so many men away in military service, women and children found themselves at the mercy of gangs of ruthless thieves and murderers. Isolated rural families—which meant most people in those days—were especially vulnerable. Food production declined and the specter of starvation stalked the land. By the middle of the war dozens of counties in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri were almost depopulated as thousands of frightened inhabitants abandoned their ravaged homes and farms and became refugees.

In the fall of 1862 the armies returned to northwest Arkansas. General Thomas C. Hindman succeeded Van Dorn as Confederate commander. Hindman believed it was essential to re-establish a Confederate military presence in northwest Arkansas. Despite severe shortages of almost everything of military value, he slowly assembled a completely new army at Fort Smith.

While Hindman was busy at Fort Smith, another Union army entered northwest Arkansas from Missouri. General James G. Blunt routed a small Confederate force near Maysville (on the Arkansas-Indian Territory line) on October 22, 1862. Hindman sent a cavalry force under General John S. Marmaduke to attack Blunt, but Blunt easily defeated the Confederates at Cane Hill on November 25, 1862. Undeterred, Hindman decided to attack Blunt with his entire army.

When Blunt learned that Hindman was approaching, he ordered General Francis G. Herron near Springfield, Missouri, to come to his support at once. Herron's men marched over one hundred miles in three days, the most extraordinary such feat in the Civil War. On December 7, 1862, Herron reached Prairie Grove, only eight miles from Cane Hill, and ran into Hindman's army. The Confederates drove back Herron's exhausted troops, but Blunt heard the noise of the battle and rushed from Cane Hill to Prairie Grove to assist Herron. In the afternoon the two halves of the Union army were reunited. The fighting raged until dark with neither side able to drive the other away. The Confederates were out of food and ammunition, however, and during the night they retreated to Fort

Smith.

Blunt's half of the Union army included Indian Home Guard regiments consisting of Cherokees, Creeks, Seminoles, and other Indians. They were better trained and equipped than the Confederate Indians at Pea Ridge. (They wore blue uniforms, etc.) No Confederate Indians took part in the battle, though an Indian force under Watie was only a few miles away.

Casualties at Prairie Grove were terrible. The 8,000 Union troops who took part in the battle lost 1,261 killed, wounded, and captured. The Confederates had between 9,000 and 11,000 men on the field and suffered at least 1,317 killed, wounded, or captured. In addition, several hundred Arkansas Confederate soldiers deserted during the battle and went over to the Union side. As was the case after Pea Ridge, wounded soldiers suffered greatly because of the lack of medical facilities on the frontier. Fortunately, Fayetteville was nearby and its surviving churches and larger houses were turned into makeshift hospitals.

On December 27-30, 1862, Blunt and Herron crossed the Boston Mountains and raided Van Buren on the Arkansas River. The Union army burned five steamboats and several warehouses full of military supplies before returning to Prairie Grove, followed by hundreds of newly liberated slaves. Instead of fighting, Hindman abandoned Van Buren and Fort Smith and withdrew towards central Arkansas with the remnants of his army. Thousands of demoralized Confederate soldiers deserted along the way. Prairie Grove and its aftermath cost the Confederates all of northwest Arkansas down to the Arkansas River.

Blunt and Herron returned to Missouri, satisfied that Hindman no longer was a threat to Missouri. A small Union garrison commanded by Colonel M. LaRue Harrison remained in Fayetteville to protect wounded soldiers who could not be moved. On April 18, 1863, a small Confederate cavalry force under General William Cabell attacked Fayetteville. By this time several Arkansas Union regiments had been formed from white northern Arkansans who opposed slavery and secession. Harrison's garrison included the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Cavalry (Union); Cabell's force included the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Cavalry (Confederate). Ironically and sadly, both regiments were composed of men from the Fayetteville area. The Confederates failed to capture the town and retreated. The fight had no impact on the course of the war in Arkansas but cost each side about seventy men killed, wounded, or captured. Harrison's Union troops occupied Fayetteville off and on until the end of the war.

Organized military forces did not return to northwest Arkansas until Blunt drove through the Indian Territory and captured Fort Smith on September 1, 1863. Withdrawing Confederates put up a brief fight at Devil's Backbone in the Ouachita Mountains about sixteen miles south of the town. Combat between regular forces in northwest Arkansas was essentially over, but endless skirmishing between pro-Union and pro-Confederate irregulars continued without letup. Dozens of murderous clashes took place in the hills and valleys. Very few prisoners were taken by either side in this type of warfare.

Fayetteville and Fort Smith were the two most isolated Union outposts in the entire Confederacy. Both towns became swollen with refugees from the lawless countryside. Hundreds of civilians died in the overcrowded, unsanitary refugee camps. Little food was available locally because so many farms had been abandoned, and Union supply trains from Missouri and Kansas were constantly harassed by Confederate troops (mostly Indians), pro-Confederate guerrillas, and hordes of outlaws. Despite the dismal situation, Union forces maintained their grip on both towns to the end of the war.

The Civil War in northwest Arkansas began with large-scale military operations and two major battles—Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove—that had a significant impact on the course of the struggle in the trans-Mississippi. After 1862, however, the scale of operations gradually declined on both sides and the nature of the fighting changed. Battles were replaced by raids, ambushes, massacres, and murders. In the final two years of the war most of those who died were civilians, not soldiers.