

## **REGIONAL SUMMARY: SOUTHWEST ARKANSAS**

**By Dr. Bill Shea**

Southwest Arkansas was the last part of the state to feel the full impact of the Civil War. During the first two years of the conflict Confederate soldiers and supplies moved along the Old Southwest Trail from Texas to Little Rock. The flow of traffic changed direction in September 1863 when Little Rock and the Arkansas River Valley were captured by Union forces.

The Confederate army under General Sterling Price retreated to Camden and fortified the town. The bankrupt, refugee state government—which consisted of Governor Harris Flanagin, a handful of legislators, and a few clerks—set up shop in Washington, but it no longer possessed any authority. During the winter of 1863-1864 there was little regular military activity in the state as both sides adjusted to their new circumstances.

The last major military operation of the war in Arkansas was part of a Union attempt to capture Shreveport. While the main Union column advanced up the Red River in Louisiana, a secondary column led by General Frederick Steele set out from Little Rock in March 1864. Steele's army of 12,000 men was beset by logistical problems as it pushed into southwest Arkansas. Price's smaller Confederate army left Camden and blocked Steele's path near Washington. Instead of attacking Price and continuing on to Shreveport, Steele unexpectedly turned east and captured Camden. The Union army was secure within the Confederate-built fortifications, but it was very short of supplies.

Steele sent Colonel James M. Williams and 1,100 Union soldiers to nearby Poison Spring in search of food. Confederate General John S. Marmaduke attacked with 3,600 Confederates, including 700 Choctaws from the Indian Territory. The isolated Union detachment was overwhelmed. Approximately 300 Union soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured, and about 170 wagons and mule teams were lost. There were about 95 Confederate casualties. The small battle of Poison Spring is notorious because the Confederates murdered many wounded or captured Union soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Colored regiment at the close of the fighting.

Poison Spring was followed by another Union defeat at Marks' Mill on April 25. A Union wagon train escorted by Colonel Francis M. Drake and 1,400 soldiers was overrun by 4,000 Confederates led by General James

F. Fagan. About 100 Union soldiers were killed or wounded, and nearly all of the rest were captured. The Confederates lost about 300 men killed and wounded, but captured another 240 wagons and mule teams.

The loss of 1,800 Union soldiers at Poison Spring and Marks' Mill was bad enough, but the loss of over 400 wagons and teams meant that the army in Camden could not be adequately supplied from Little Rock. At this time Steele learned that the main Union column in Louisiana had been defeated at Mansfield and the Shreveport campaign was over. As there no longer was any reason to remain in Camden, Steele evacuated the town and headed back towards Little Rock.

The Confederates pursued and caught up while the Union army was crossing the Saline River at Jenkins' Ferry on April 30. The Union troops were hard-pressed but they repulsed several Confederate attacks and escaped across the Saline. About 700 Union soldiers and 1,000 Confederate soldiers were casualties. Steele returned to Little Rock on May 3 with a reduced and demoralized army. Jenkins' Ferry was the fifth and last major battle fought in Arkansas (the others were Pea Ridge, Prairie Grove, Arkansas Post, and Helena).

Confederate morale revived somewhat after the Camden Expedition, and during the summer of 1864 there was an increase in the scale and intensity of attacks against Union outposts, patrols, wagon trains, railroads, and steamboats. In the fall of 1864 Price led most of the Confederate army in Arkansas northward on a quixotic effort to make Missouri a Confederate state. After wandering aimlessly across Missouri for weeks, Price was defeated at Westport (now Independence), Missouri, and Mine Creek, Kansas, on October 23 and 25 by his old nemesis, Union General Samuel R. Curtis. Thousands of Confederates were killed, wounded, captured, or simply deserted in disgust. Among the captured was General Marmaduke. Price returned to southwest Arkansas with barely one-third of his army.

The disastrous failure of Price's Raid more than balanced out the fiasco of the Camden Expedition, but it did not matter. In southwest Arkansas both sides settled down to await the inevitable, which occurred in June 1865.