

'A Day Away...'

Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park

- Site of last major Civil War engagement in northwest Arkansas



THE LATTA HOUSE on the grounds of Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park west of Fayetteville, Arkansas - where more than 2,700 men were killed, wounded or missing in action on a single day - December 7, 1862. - Indexfoto

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is one in an occasional series entitled 'A Day Away' - featuring interesting events and places within a 24-hour round trip of Bridgeport.)

by Keith Bridwell

December 7, 1862 was an important date for the people of Arkansas and Missouri, because it was the date of the last major Civil War battle in northwest Arkansas, and because the result of that skirmish allowed Union forces to effectively claim control of Missouri.

The Battle of Prairie Grove was fought on about 500 acres of land in the rolling hills west of Fayetteville, alongside what is now U.S. Highway 62 and the town of

Prairie Grove.

The U.S. Civil War began in 1861 and ended in 1865, but in late 1862, Confederate (Southern) forces had moved southward from southwest Missouri and were wintering in the milder climate of northwest Arkansas.

They had suffered a meaningful defeat at the hands of Union (Northern) forces at the Battle of Pea Ridge near the Arkansas/Missouri border on March 7 and 8 of that year, and many of the Confederate troops had moved across the Mississippi River to bolster the Army of Tennessee.

Following his victory at Pea Ridge, Union General Samuel Curtis pressed his invasion of northern Arkansas with the in-

tent of reaching the capital city of Little Rock. When his troops neared that city, however, they were rebuffed in a psychologically-important Confederate victory at the Battle of Whitney Lane near Searcy.

General Curtis regrouped in Helena, and ordered a subordinate - General John M. Schofield at Springfield, Missouri - to drive Confederate forces out of southwestern Missouri and to penetrate northwestern Arkansas.

Schofield divided his Army of the Frontier into two units - one to remain near Springfield, commanded by General Francis J. Herron and the other to probe northwest Arkansas, commanded by General James G. Blunt.

At the same time, Confederate General Thomas C. Hindman maintained a field command of Arkansas troops, and becoming aware of the Union Army's precarious tactical position, convinced his superiors to allow him to mount an expedition into northwest Arkansas. He hoped to catch the Union army in its divided state, destroy it in detail and open the way for an invasion of Missouri.

Hindman's forces gathered at Fort Smith and sent about 2,000 cavalry under General John S. Marmaduke to confront Blunt's forces and provide a diversion for the main Confederate force.

Unexpectedly, Blunt moved forward with his 5,000 men and 30 pieces of artillery to meet Marmaduke. The two clashed in a nine-hour skirmish known as the Battle of Cane Hill on November 28.

Marmaduke was pushed back, but Blunt found himself 35 miles deeper into Arkansas and that much further from the remainder of his army.

On December 3, Hindman started moving his main body of 11,000 poorly-equipped men and 22 cannons across the Boston Mountains and toward Blunt's division. Blunt, realizing his precarious position, telegraphed Herron in Missouri and ordered him to march immediately to his support, then established a defensive position around Cane Hill to wait for Herron and his troops.

Herron's divisions had come quickly to Blunt's rescue, and met Marmaduke's probing cavalry south of Fayetteville. Confederate General Hindman's characteristically aggressive nature seemed to fail him at the moment. Afraid that Blunt would be able to attack his rear, and having to face Herron to the North, Hindman chose instead to set up a defensive position atop a line of low hills overlooking the Illinois River near Prairie Grove.

The battle opened on the morning of December 7 with an artillery duel which opened the way for a Union attack. Between noon and 2 p.m., two Union charges met with bloody repulse.

The battered Union forces were reinforced about 2:30 by Blunt's arrival on the battlefield. The fighting spread westward with savage attack and counter attack until darkness called it to a halt.

The Confederate Army re-

treated southward during the night because its supply of ammunition and food was nearly exhausted.

After sleeping on the battlefield, the Union Army awoke to find the Southern Army gone, allowing them to claim a strategic victory. In truth, almost identical numbers of soldiers were lost on both sides, and a total of over 2,700 men were killed, wounded or missing in action the day before.

The battle received its name from Prairie Grove Church, which was used by Confederate General Hindman as his headquarters during the battle. Afterwards, both sides used the church as a hospital.

The town of Prairie Grove was established in 1888, and got its name from the Civil War battle.

The Borden house west of the Illinois River was a central point during the battle, and the Borden wheat field, orchard and cornfield were all sites of some of the fiercest fighting.

After the battle, General Herron reported 250 dead within a 100-yard radius of the house. One soldier said the ground was muddy with blood on the hillside where Confederate cannons sat during the battle.

Herron's infantry advanced through the Borden cornfield to assault the ridge. After both attacks failed, Confederate counterattacks crossed this ground only to be shattered by Union cannons firing canister at ranges of less than 100 yards at times.

One soldier commented afterwards that you could walk a long distance without touching the ground because of the dead bodies in this field and along the slope of the ridge.

Fourteen-year-old Julia West witnessed the Battle of Prairie Grove from her family home - the Robert West house - on the northwest side of the battlefield, and said, "It was a beautiful, cold, frosty Sunday morning. About 10 o'clock the cannonading began and about noon war began in earnest, when it seemed everyone would be killed. You can never know the horrors of a battle unless you have seen or been

in one. The fighting was constant. Families hunted safety in the cellars. Our home being on the north side, we felt we were comparatively safe and

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THIS 70,000-TON BATTLE MONUMENT was the chimney from a steam-powered mill at nearby Rhea, Arkansas, and was dedicated to all who fought at Prairie Grove. - Indexfoto



THE KITCHEN and nearby herb garden at the Latta House are still immaculately preserved and operational today, and are open to guests year-round. - Indexfoto



Union General James G. Blunt entered his 5,000 troops into battle just east of this marker about 2:30 on the afternoon of December 7, 1862 against Confederate troops under the command of General Thomas C. Hindman. - Indexfoto



AN AFTERNOON-LONG BLOOD BATH involved more than 15,000 Confederate and Union troops near this peaceful location during the early months of the Civil War. An inviting park now welcomes guests daily. - Indexfoto