

Cedar Prairie in the Civil War

Most citizens of Pocola are aware of the historical marker, "Battle of Backbone Mountain," which can be seen on Highway 112 atop Backbone Mountain. Those who stop to read it may be surprised to realize that Pocola has a Civil War history. However, many are misled by the information on the sign. The battle itself actually took place in Arkansas, but the information on the bottom half is essentially correct.

Many, if not most, of the residents in Pocola are not aware of the events which took place, literally in their back yard, during the Civil War. For example, few know of the existence of the two military roads, traces of which can still be seen today crisscrossing their community. Both were known as the Fort Smith--Fort Towson Military Road; the first was built in 1832 and the second in 1838. Both played an important role during the Civil War years. Pocola, then known as Cedar Prairie, was used as a staging and rendezvous point for the Confederates. The town hall, the post office, and most of the residences of Pocola are situated on this "prairie" today.

The 1832 military road was constructed from Fort Smith to Fort Towson and intersects Skullyville. It ran through Braden Bottoms along today's Highway 9A through Skullyville, then turned south towards the Red River and Fort Towson. The 1838 military road crosses through Pocola from the northeast section of town and travels in a southwesterly direction to the point where Highway 112 crosses over Backbone Mountain. The road entered Pocola approximately where the two bingo halls today are located, proceeded to a point just south of the Pocola Elementary School, passed to the southeast of the Senior Citizen's Building, continued to the west of the Pocola First United Methodist Church, and from there crossed over Backbone Mountain, just about where Highway 112 goes over the mountain today.

During the last week of August 1863, the Federals, commanded by Major General James G. Blunt, chased Brigadier General William L. Cabell's Confederates through Cedar Prairie before the two armies engaged at Devil's Backbone Ridge, about two miles southwest of Greenwood, Arkansas, on September 1, 1863.

General Cabell had been pursued by Blunt for nearly six weeks. Soon after the Battle of Honey Springs, fought on July 17, 1863 near present-day Checotah, Oklahoma, General Blunt decided to pursue Cabell's army, which was headed for friendlier territory in Arkansas. The pursuit parallels today's Oklahoma Highway 9 through Stigler, Keota, and Spiro.

On the 21st of August, Cabell concentrated all his troops "at McLean's Crossing of the Poteau (River), 9 miles southwest of Fort Smith, and about 8 miles from Scullyville, on the middle road." Scullyville, spelled today Skullyville, is a small community located just east of today's Spiro. Some Pocola residents place the location of McLean's Crossing (some in Pocola spell it McClain's) near the Cedar Creek bridge at the northwest base of a hill on which Tri-State Speedway is situated. However, there are others who place the crossing in southwestern Pocola nearer Backbone Mountain.

After an artillery duel, the Confederates fled through Cedar Prairie by "various routes southward" toward Jenny Lind, Arkansas, on the morning of September 1, 1863. The Federals caught up with the Confederates at Devil's Backbone Ridge, which is a U-shaped mountain located to the south and west of Greenwood, Arkansas. After a three hour battle, the Confederates left the field. The Union troops then controlled Fort Smith until the end of the War Between the States.

In July 1864, the Confederates used Cedar Prairie as a staging and rendezvous point as they laid siege to Fort Smith. Confederate Brigadier General Douglas H. Cooper received reports that a force of Federal cavalry were encamped on Massard Prairie, south of Fort Smith. He instructed General Richard Gano to organize a cavalry unit to attack the Sixth Kansas Cavalry.

According to Captain William Murphy Cravens, a Confederate soldier involved in the attack, on the morning of July 27th, the Confederates left Buck Creek Camp which was located southeast of present-day Bokoshe, Oklahoma. They crossed the Poteau River at Page's Ferry (again, there are varying accounts among some citizens as to the exact location), crossed through Cedar Prairie and over a mountain (Stephen's or George?) on the east side of Cedar Prairie until they reached the camp site on Massard Prairie.

Fortunately, the campsite for the Sixth Cavalry was discovered and now has been preserved. It can be found between a housing development and the Hiram Walker plant, just off Red Pine Road, about a tenth of a mile east of Arkansas Highway 45 which runs east of Rheem Manufacturing.

On July 27th, Cooper ordered Gano's force, except for Lieutenant Colonel Jack McCurtain's Choctaw battalion, to "rendezvous on (the) Poteau (River), near Page's Ferry." The Confederate battle plan called for an attack on Massard Prairie and "if pursued...to retreat by the Fort Towson road" over Backbone Mountain, where McCurtain's Choctaws "lay in ambush." A detachment from Gano's brigade was "to remain concealed near Page's, on Cedar Prairie, until the Federals should pass in pursuit." At that point, an ambush would be sprung upon the Federals "at the Backbone." The Federals did give chase but turned back before they could be attacked.

Perhaps "Page's" refers to the home of John Page, a prominent Choctaw from Cedar Prairie, who lived just a few yards west of the 1838 Military Road. His house was built on a small knoll which is located about 200 yards south of the present-day cemetery which bears his name. The Page Cemetery can still be seen just east of Highway 112 about a quarter of a mile south of Victory Plaza.

Page's house is a logical rendezvous point, for if one were to draw a straight line from Skullyville to present-day Jenny Lind, it would intersect the Military Road precisely at Page's. One then can speculate that this was one of the "routes southward" that

Cabell's men traveled in their attempt to escape from Blunt's troops a year earlier on their way to Greenwood, Arkansas, where the Battle of Backbone took place.

Four days later, on July 31st, the Confederates, under the direction of General Cooper, attacked Fort Smith in what is now called "The Siege of Fort Smith." Cooper ordered a unit of Creeks under Major Barnett's command to form "a junction at Wat. Folsom's on Towson road, near Cedar Prairie." From this and several other points, the Confederates "routed the Federal pickets," until they rallied and drove the Confederates back toward Cedar Prairie. The Confederates encamped on Cedar Prairie for the night. "Wat. Folsom's on Towson road" was located on Cedar Creek, close to the junction of the road coming from McLean's Crossing to the main Fort Smith--Fort Towson Military Road.

Perhaps the Backbone marker in Pocola should be moved to a spot near Cedar Creek on Highway 9 with this revised information:

The Civil War in Cedar Prairie (Pocola)

"Federal forces commanded by Maj. Gen. James G. Blunt pursued Confederate units, under the leadership of Brig. Gen. William L. Cabell between Skullyville, near Spiro, to McClain's Crossing of the Poteau River, located nearby. These skirmishes culminated in an artillery duel at dusk on August 31, 1863. During the night, Cabell escaped using various roads through Cedar Prairie to Jenny Lind, Arkansas. The next day, September 1st, the Battle of Devil's Backbone Ridge occurred, just southwest of Greenwood, Arkansas.

"Also, in 1864, Confederate cavalry units, under Gen. R. Gano and Gen. Stand Watie, used Cedar Prairie as a staging area to attack Federal outposts at Massard Prairie on July 27th and the Fort Smith military outpost at Belle Point on July 31st."

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