

The Battle of Norris Bridge

I. CONTEXT

In November of 1863, the Union Army arrived on the shores of Calhoun County and soon forced the evacuation of Confederate soldiers manning Fort Esperanza that was located on Pass Cavallo; the entrance to Matagorda Bay. Once this important coastal defense fell, the Army began concentrating troops on Matagorda Island as part of Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Bank's plan to invade Texas.¹ As well as spreading troops across the pass to Decros Point, on the western tip of Matagorda Peninsula, the Union Army moved up the eastern shore of Matagorda Bay and established "splendid winter quarters" at the frontier seaport of Indianola.²

When the Union Army eventually left Indianola by June of 1864, James Duff, Colonel of the 33rd Texas Cavalry, estimated there had been 14 regiments located there with an average strength of 350 men each. In addition, they had at their disposal eight rifled 6-pounders, four 12-pounders and two 12-pounder rifled guns.³

II. OVERVIEW

During the Civil War, the Union Army and Texas troops rarely met on the field of battle, at least in Texas. However, an engagement occurred one morning in Calhoun County on the banks of Chocolate Bayou. According to Albert O. Marshall, a soldier of the 33rd Illinois, assigned to the 99th Illinois at the time, "Early on the morning of the twenty-sixth of December, a large portion of our brigade, under the command of General Warren, started out to make a reconnaissance in force of the country, to learn, if possible, something of the number, whereabouts and intentions of the enemy in our vicinity."⁴

The destination for the morning's trip was Lavaca (current day Port Lavaca), and in order for the General and his men to reach the town in a timely manner, they would have to cross Norris Bridge over Chocolate Bayou.

Norris Bridge was named after A. W. Norris who purchased what was known as "the Bridge Property" in 1857 for the sum of \$3,800.⁵ Norris and his family lived nearby and he operated the bridge on a toll basis. Norris Bridge was also the location of a Confederate picket post manned by the 33rd Texas Cavalry for the purpose of spying on Union troops located at Indianola.⁶

Marshall was an eyewitness that morning to the events that transpired at Norris Bridge:

"Within four miles of Port Lavaca we came to the Chocolate River. The river here is crossed by a very fair bridge. We found the bridge in the possession of a small band of the enemy. They had set it on fire and attempted to hold it until it should burn enough to prevent us from crossing. This plan of theirs did not suit us in the least, as, had it been executed, it would have detained us considerably, if not actually prevented us from crossing. Our artillery was wheeled into line and opened on the enemy. Under cover of the fire of our cannon, some of our soldiers ran up, and using their hats for buckets

carried water from the stream and put the fire out, almost in the face of the furious Texas rangers who had attempted to burn the bridge. Seeing that they were defeated, our opponents mounted their horses and rode away and were soon out of our reach. As we were unfortunate in not having any cavalry with us, they easily escaped. With a couple of companies of good cavalry we could have captured them.

To throw a few planks in place of those burned was the work of but a few moments. We then crossed over and continued our march into the town without further obstruction.”⁷

As one might guess, if the story of the battle was told from the Confederate perspective it would likely be in a more dramatic way, however, the basics of both accounts are consistent. From the account of the battle, as told by Alex Sweet, co-author of “On a Mexican Mustang”, and also a member of the 33rd Texas, Company A, the tale is principally the same, albeit more lengthy and humorous:

"There were about forty of us; and, as we could see at least three thousand infantry and a battery of artillery all coming rapidly in the direction of the bridge, it became very evident that something unpleasant was going to happen. As for the cavalry that chased us, they went back in a hurry; for, as soon as they got within two hundred yards of the bridge, a volley was fired at them which relieved them of any doubts as to our being militia, armed with shotguns. Our men were running to and fro, and everybody was asking where the captain was.”⁸

All at once a battery dashed up at full gallop, on a slight elevation four hundred yards distant, and wheeled around to bring the guns to bear on us. Just then Sam McWhorter diverted my thoughts from the enemy and from Capt. Dick Taylor, who continued to prance about, and exhort his soldiers to have patience. Sam saw the horses turn to bring the guns to bear on us. When he noticed the movement, he thought that the Yankees had got frightened, and were going back to Indianola; and he could not repress his exultant emotions. As soon as he saw the horses turn, he took off his hat, and began to cheer vociferously, 'Hurrah for the Southern Confederacy! Hurrah for Jeff Davis!'

I had my eye riveted on the enemy's guns. They were now very much depressed, but not more than I was. Just as Sam was swinging his hat, and stretching his mouth to its utmost capacity, there was a puff of smoke in front of the battery, and a shell went screaming, like a demon with a cold in his head, about four feet above Sam's red head. He was not looking at the battery: he thought it was on its way back to Indianola. He had his mouth so much expanded, encouraging some great southern leader with his cheers, that his eyes were shut when the shell howled past him. He suddenly opened his eyes, and gave a side-glance at me, so mournfully ludicrous that it made me laugh in spite of the seriousness of the situation. The red bristles on his head were standing straight up on end.”⁹

The Union battery continued shelling the Texan's position, firing a total of around 30 shells during the battle.¹⁰ The exploding shells only took their toll on the nerves of the defenders, however, the one fatality during the battle was a Union officer felled by a 400 yd. musket shot through the thigh.

When Capt. Taylor considered his men to have shown enough bravery in the face of the Union assault, he gave the order to retreat: "Get up and git now." According to Sweet,

“Never was an order on the battlefield more cheerfully obeyed. There was mounting in hot haste, for the two guns kept up a steady firing. By this time the infantry were within a few hundred yards, and the bullets of the skirmishers were assisting in making us wish the war was over. We adopted the Cossack plan of bewildering the enemy; that is we spread out suddenly in different directions. It is rather a difficult thing to hit a man two or three miles off on the prairie. They would have got some of us if we had not scattered. Fortunately for us, there was a herd of cows on a distant hill that the Yankees mistook for part of our command. They trained two of the guns on the cattle while we were scattering. The cows, not having any more sense than we had, waited to be shelled. They staid there until the gunners got the range. We afterwards learned that the carnage was dreadful: tenderloin steaks and soup-bones were found scattered over the country for miles.”

Sweet received information after the battle and stated: “When Gen. Warren came over the bridge at the head of his victorious army, after we had fallen back, he made inquiry as to what troops we were. He said we were either very brave men, or the grandest fools in the whole western hemisphere. We felt very much complimented when we heard this. The idea of forty men trying to hold a bridge against three thousand infantry and a battery of artillery seemed to him as something out of the usual order of things.”¹¹

Besides the damage that Norris suffered to his bridge over the Chocolate at the hands of the Texans, according to an article in the Victoria Advocate, also published in the Galveston Daily News, his home did not fair well at the hands of the Union Army: “At Chocolate Bridge they acted in a villainous manner. They entered the house of Mr. Norris, whose wife and children were at home, and destroyed everything in the shape of food, maliciously cutting up the furniture, bedding, &c. If two or three hundred good men had been there, the rascals would have had other work to attend to instead of war on women and children.”¹²

III. SIGNIFICANCE

While the Battle of Norris Bridge was a brief military encounter on the banks of Chocolate Bayou, an engagement in Texas between a Union artillery battery and Texas cavalry was rare and is significant to the Civil War era history of Calhoun County, as well as the State. A Texas Historical Marker would not only bring attention to this battle that occurred on county soil, it would also bring to the attention of readers the significant U.S. Army presence that was in Calhoun County during the Civil War.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

1 Townsend, Steven A., The Yankee Invasion of Texas. Texas A&M University Press, College Station (2006), 11.

2. Ibid., 40-44.

3. Malsch, Brownson, Indianola, The Mother of Western Texas. Shoal Creek Publishers, Inc., Austin, Texas (1977), 180

4 Marshall, Albert O., Army Life; From A Soldier's Journal. Chicago Legal News Company (1883), 342.

5. Calhoun County Records. October 17, 1857, Vol E, 479.
6. Townsend, Steven A., *The Yankee Invasion of Texas*. Texas A&M University Press, College Station (2006), 35.
7. Marshall, Albert O., *Army Life; From A Soldier's Journal*. Chicago Legal News Company (1883), 342-43.
8. Sweet, Alex E. and Knox, J. *Armory, On a Mexican Mustang, Through Texas, From the Gulf to the Rio Grande*. S.S. Scranton & Company. (1883), 493.
9. *Ibid.*, 495-96.
10. Townsend, Steven A., *The Yankee Invasion of Texas*. Texas A&M University Press, College Station (2006), 35.
11. Sweet, Alex E. and Knox, J. *Armory, On a Mexican Mustang, Through Texas, From the Gulf to the Rio Grande*. S.S. Scranton & Company. (1883), 495-98.
12. *Galveston Weekly News*, January 20, 1864, p. 2, c. 2.