

## **ADDRESS FOR THE 1995 MEMORIAL SERVICE HONEY SPRINGS BATTLEFIELD**

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In 1854 the Civil War began with the bloody, vengeful, and highly personal fighting along the border between Kansas Territory and Missouri. This brutal warfare, which earned our neighbor to the north the title of Bleeding Kansas in the 1850s, spread to the Indian Territory during the early 1860s. In 1865, in the Choctaw Nation at a place called Doaksville, the Civil War ended when the last Confederate general surrendered. Nowhere but in the west did the Civil War last so long or extract such a toll.

The Civil War was a rite of passage for our country. It established the foundation that would allow the United States to stand today as a great nation. In Kansas, where Civil War raged for six years before a shot was fired on Fort Sumter, the war created an ethos that guided a young state and that still is found in its people and institutions, and forever symbolized in its motto, "to the stars through difficulty." In Oklahoma, the Civil War caused a level of devastation seen nowhere else. This, and the unfair reconstruction era treaties with the Five Tribes, created the setting from which we emerged as a state 43 years after that last rebel general rode into Doaksville.

We are today commemorating one of the most significant battles fought west of the Mississippi River during the Civil War. Our commemoration, however, symbolizes a rebirth of interest in this place that can be traced to the passage of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War in the 1960s. You will hear today from Dr. Leroy Fischer who has since then led the movement to memorialize this place as a battlefield park.

In the 100 years between July 17, 1863, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this battle, the people who fought on this land lived out their lives, and passed away. They or others did not see fit to commemorate this hallowed land as a park or with monuments or markers. With the rapid return of this land to private agricultural use, the events of July 17, 1863, became less and less a part of this place, and the legends of the battle became more and more general. The land became disconnected with the events of 1863 that bring

us here today. As the movement grew to commemorate the Honey Springs Battlefield, and to use it to educate our children about the Civil War in the Indian Territory, this disconnectedness led to frustration and to argument about where the events of July 17 occurred.

Last year, The Oklahoma Historical Society was awarded a grant from the American Battlefield Protection Program to conduct archaeological reconnaissance of the battlefield. This was done in the fall of last year with a crew of volunteers, appropriately drawn, I believe, from Kansas and Oklahoma. The goal of our research, put very simply, was to reconnect the land to the events of July 17, 1863. I believe we have succeeded.

Our study happened about two miles north of here, north of where the Texas Road crossed Elk Creek. By all accounts this is where the battle started. Our approach was to systematically scan the ground with metal detectors, excavate artifacts, and precisely record the location of those that seemed to be from the Civil War. For three weeks we did this, covering hundreds of acres of public and private land. We found Minie balls, gun parts, buttons, coins, cannonball fragments, and other residue of battle. Some 700 artifacts have now been cataloged that I can say with confidence were left on this ground on July 17, 1863, to be seen again only 130 years later. By looking at our maps of the finds, I can see that there are patterns to where they are found, and places where few or no artifacts occur. I can see the edges of the intense fighting, places where troops were aligned, the location of the Texas road and the placement of cannon. I can see, for the first time in many years, a map of the battlefield that shows where certain events happened, and I can reconnect these events to the modern landscape. I can walk on that ground north of Elk Creek and know where things happened, sometimes at a very specific and emotional level. This ground has become hallowed for me, where before it was not. With time and development, we will all be able to walk over this ground and sense this reconnectedness to the events of July 17, 1863.

We have done this, however, by dismantling the battle as a movement of armies commanded by generals and lesser officers, and looking first at the individual soldier. When you find a dropped bullet or a lost coin or button you are, after all, connecting with an individual. When you uncover an 1854 half dime, minted ironically the year Kansas became a territory and the Civil War began, you are connecting to that soldier, unknown to us now, who stood at precisely that place on the battlefield. Likewise, each

dropped or discarded bullet connects us with a place where a soldier stood during the battle-maybe only for a moment. A row of buttons in a ravine connects us with soldiers who took cover during the fighting, or sought refuge once wounded. Fired bullets and cannonball fragments are less direct yet connect us with individuals-they were after all fired by one soldier to kill another and their location is therefore meaningful .

Through artifacts and the individuals they inform us about, we can also reconnect with the emotion of battle. The concentrations of fired bullets and exploded cannonballs and scattered canister tell us of an intensity of fighting that, for the individuals who were there to loose buttons and drop bullets, must have been horrific. The ramrod impressions on fired bullets tell of guns becoming fowled by repeated firing of black powder. The broken and scattered gun parts tell of the destruction of the tools of war and, by grim association, of the people who once used them.

Here we are not talking of Union or Confederate, but places on this battlefield where individuals once stood. At a very important level it matters not whether they fought for the United States or the Confederacy for they all were and became again members of the same nation. Built through the eyes of individuals, the story of the battlefield is powerful and meaningful in a fashion rarely found on a tour of a battlefield. I hope that we can capture this sense of the individual in whatever we do here at Honey Springs.

With our findings, however, we can nonetheless step back and look at the progression of the battle as the clash of two armies. We know that on the morning of July 17, Confederate Brigadier General Douglas H. Cooper had his Texans, Choctaws, and Chickasaws spread out for a mile and a half in the brush and trees along Elk Creek at the Texas Road. U.S. Maj. Gen. James G. Blunt was approaching from the north along the Texas Road with the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Indian Home Guard, and volunteers from Kansas, Wisconsin, and Colorado. Blunt allowed his troops to bivouac in a draw one half mile north of the Confederate lines, and then moved south along the Texas Road. When he was one-quarter mile from the Confederates, Blunt deployed his troops along the both sides of the road. An intense battle ensued, eventually resulting in the defeat of Cooper's forces and their retreat along the Texas Road toward this place where we are now assembled.

The passage of time and the vague battle reports had led to uncertainty, however, as to where these things had happened. Archaeology has provided us with a new set of historical facts about the battle, and provides an answer to the question of where key events occurred. In reaching my conclusions, I have drawn on the historical accounts of the battle, the physical evidence of the battle from our archaeological work, and from an analysis of the landscape. This leads me to several conclusions:

- We know with some confidence, limited only by our inability to study certain private lands, where the core of the battle was. While troops may have been spread along a mile and a half front, I am confident that the fighting that the official reports describe happened along a front no more than a half-mile, and possibly only a quarter-mile, in extent. But in this area, the fighting was indeed intense. The physical record shows an unrelenting assault of the Confederate positions with surprisingly little evidence of sustained fire toward the advancing United States troops.
- Also, I can now walk along a stream, and speak with confidence that this is where Blunt had his troops bivouac prior to battle. We found very little here, but this place is one-half mile from where we have identified the Confederate position, and analysis of the landscape shows it to be sheltered from unfriendly fire. As you move away from this stream and toward the Rebel positions, evidence of battle is found at that point where a line of sight would have been established between the opposing forces.
- Further, I can walk along a now-wooded draw and know that during or after the battle, soldiers-possibly wounded-sought refuge here. This draw is close to the Confederate lines and runs parallel to them. I know of its use during the battle by the numerous buttons and equipment parts found along its length.
- And I can walk along the ruts of an old road and know that it was the Texas Road, and stop at that point where the fiercest fighting of the battle occurred. I know it is the Texas Road because of evidence of an artillery bombardment, certainly from U.S. guns, and certainly directed at Confederate cannon placed along the road. The center of the battle is marked by a concentration of fired bullets, cannonball

fragments, and canister matched in intensity nowhere else in our study.

- Finally, I can walk to and fro across the battlefield, and if I so desired, I could place a marker where a soldier stood sometime during the battle. I know this from our finding the coin that he dropped, from the button that fell from his uniform, from the bullet that he discarded, of from the harmonica that he once played around the camp fire. Honey Springs has always been important to me-on this spot I began my career in archaeology. Today, however, Honey Springs means much more because I have been able, through archaeology, history, and the study of the landscape, to reconnect with the people and the events of July 17, 1863. For me, this reconnection is real and it is powerful and it is meaningful and it is the stuff from which successful site interpretation should be constructed. It is my hope that within a few years time we will use this new information to interpret this hallowed ground in such a way that it will be meaningful to all who come to see and learn.

We will return here this coming fall for a second phase of work, also funded by the Battlefield Protection Program. Our goal remains the same: to continue to reconnect the events of July 17, 1863, to the modern landscape.