

Texas Ranger Tales

by Mike Cox



More than a decade before Texas celebrated a centennial of independence from Mexico by putting up hundreds of historical markers across the state, the school children of Taylor collected money for a stone marker commemorating a little-known fight between Comanche warriors and Texas Rangers called the Battle of Brushy Creek.

Historian Walter Prescott Webb, then doing research that would lead to a book on the Rangers, traveled the 30 miles from Austin to present the keynote speech when Williamson County residents gathered to dedicate the monument on Nov. 5, 1925.

Located on private property off Circle G Ranch Road just to the west of State Highway 195, four miles south of Taylor, the monument is a tombstone-sized slab of red granite bearing a bronze plaque that says:

In Grateful Memory To Those Who Gave Their Lives In The Battle Of Brushy Creek 1839

Erected By Friends and Students Of Taylor Public School

Busy bird-dogging political news in the Capital City, neither of Austin's two daily newspapers covered Webb's talk. Had reporters been there, they would have heard him explain to those on hand that the fight on Brushy Creek had been the culmination of a series of events that began the month before.

On Jan. 26, 1839, La Grange plantation owner John H. Moore led 63 volunteers and nearly a score of Lipan Apache scouts on an expedition against a large party of Comanches camped on the upper San Gabriel River. A fight on February 15 proved indecisive, but like most conflicts, spilled blood soon brought more spilled blood.

In retaliation, a Comanche war party with as many as 300 warriors swept down the Colorado River into the settlements of Central Texas, killing Elizabeth Coleman and two of her children on February 24 in Bastrop

County. The raiders also struck the nearby cabin of Dr. James W. Robertson. Luckily for the doctor and his family, they were not at home, but the Indians captured seven of his slaves – a woman, five children and an old man.

As word of the Indian incursion spread, fourteen Bastrop county men under Capt. John J. Grumbles saddled up to pursue the raiders. They soon overtook the war party but pulled back when they realized they had bitten off more than they could chew. Following the arrival of an additional 52 men, the volunteers resumed the pursuit under the command of Jacob Burleson.

Twenty-five miles from the scene of the Coleman massacre, Burleson and his volunteers overtook the Comanches on the prairie near Brushy Creek. As the Indians tried to reach a line of timber that would have afforded them a more easily defended position, Burleson ordered his men to gallop between the Indians and the trees.

Fourteen-year-old Winslow Turner and veteran Indian-fighter Samuel Highsmith did as they were told and dismounted to face the Indians. But the other volunteers, realizing they were seriously outnumbered, wheeled their horses to flee.

Knowing he could not face the Comanches with only one man and a boy, Burleson shouted to the pair to get back on their horses and retreat as well. Just as Burleson started to spur his horse into a run for safety, he saw that the teenager was having trouble getting back astride his nervous mount. Burleson jumped out of his saddle to lend a hand and caught an Indian bullet in the back of his head.

Edward Burleson, a brigadier general in the militia, soon arrived with reinforcements. Assuming overall command, the general rode after the Indians who had killed his brother.

The Houston Telegraph offered this account of the fight that followed: "General Burleson, at the head of about 70 men, recently encountered

a large body of Indians on the Brushy, and, after one or two skirmishes, finding the enemy numerous, retreated to a ravine in order to engage them with more advantage; but the Indians, fearing to attack him in his new position, drew off and retreated into a neighboring thicket.

"Being unable to pursue them, he returned to Bastrop. It is reported that he has lost three men in this engagement; the loss of the Indians is not known; it, however, must have been considerable, as most of the men under Burleson were excellent marksmen, and had often been engaged in Indian warfare."

The newspaper had it mostly right. When the Indians fell back into the woods, Burleson and his men got what sleep they could overnight and charged the thicket early on the morning of Feb. 25. But they found the Indians had decamped.

They had left behind one of Dr. Robertson's slaves, an old man who told Burleson the Rangers had killed about 30 of the Indians. If that number was correct, Burleson's losses were minor in comparison – only three men (Ed Blakey, John Walters and James Gilleland) killed or mortally wounded. But he also had lost a brother.

J.W. Wilbarger devoted four-and-a-half pages to the fight in his 1889 classic book, "Indian Depredations of Texas." Noah Smithwick, who participated in Moore's expedition but missed the Brushy Creek fight, later termed the battle "disastrous," the result of a "badly managed pursuit."

In the end, the only accomplishment attributable to the fight on Brushy Creek was that it further fueled the animosity between Comanche and Texans.