

Beecher Island history told

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Today, the battle site which took place on Beecher Island, 19 miles west of St. Francis on U.S. 35, then north, is a peaceful place. The cottonwoods shade the area which is just north of the Arikaree River which lazily moves along. This quiet setting is a far cry from the fierce battle which took place in 1868.

The Battle of Beecher Island did not take place until Sept. 17, 1868, but the cause may be traced back to 1864 when the Brule-Sioux and Ogallala Indians murdered all of the settlers in three counties in Minnesota. They took all of the guns, ammunition and stock of these settlers.

Home guards were raised and then never let up. The Indians were driven across the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and then into Nebraska.

For a year and a half, they were very destitute but, by 1866, they had tanned enough buffalo robes for tepees to be comfortable and had cured enough meat for provisions, but they did not have ponies. They were very quiet for about 10 months and, in 1866, they visited the Cheyennes and Arapahoes and also the Red Cloud band of Sioux to get acquainted.

The council decided to murder all the frontier people in Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska but there were two drawbacks: 1) they had two enemies whom they dreaded more than they did the whites. They were the Pawnee Indians of Nebraska and the Kaw Indians of Kansas. These Indians were "reservation Indians" and they would help the whites.

The council figured the only way to accomplish their plan was to steal the ponies of the Pawnee and Kaw Indians.... without their ponies, they would be "out of commission."

Another fact in favor of the fierce Indians was there was only one regiment of United States soldiers guarding an area of 400 miles north and south, and 500 miles east and west.

The Indians began stealing stock until they had stolen 400 head of ponies from the Kaw. They raided the settlers on the Neosho River, Smokey Hill River and the Saline River.

They killed frontiersmen, outraged and murdered their women and carried their younger children into captivity. Many of the settlers on the Saline River were people who had served in the Civil War and they were ready to fight.

About this same time, General P.H. Sheridan appointed Major George Forsyth to command a group of scouts against hostile Indians. The Major would personally select the scouts and offer them \$1 a day and 35 cents a day for the use of their horses. While they would not be enlisted men, they would still have equipment from the government and soldiers' rations. Major Forsyth's second in command was Fred Beecher.

Each scout's equipment consisted of a blanket, saddle, bridle, lariat, picket-pin, canteen, haversack, butcher knife, tin plate and cup. The also received a Spencer repeating rifle (carrying six shots in the magazine besides the one in the barrel), a Colt's revolver (Army size) and 140 rounds of rifle and 30 rounds of re-

volver ammunition.

Each carried seven days of cooked rations in his haversack. Also taken with the scouts was a pack-train of four mules carrying camp kettles, picks, shovels, 4,000 extra rounds of ammunitions, some medical supplies and extra rations of salt and coffee.

The 50 men were selected and were easy to find as work was scarce and the money offered was good.

They made their way across the Saline River and south fork on the Solomon and then struck Beaver Creek where the Short Nose Creek emptied into it. It was evident that there had been a great sun dance and that is where the Indians had probably decided to go to war with the whites.

The scouts were called to the site of an Indian attack where two Mexicans had been killed. They were part of a freighter's train.

Following the tracks, they eventually met up with a dead end. They again found tracks which led them to believe that there was a very large tribe of Indians ahead.

They followed the signs for some time, but, on Sept. 16, horses tired and hungry, they stopped early. The valley was small and well grassed. Nearby, was a river which had an island about 200- by 50-feet and about 70 yards from either side of the bank.

The book, *The Battle of Beecher Island*, describes the long sage grass growing on the center of the island while, just at its foot stood a young cottonwood tree that was 20-feet tall.

Evidently sensing danger, the major ordered his men to not only hobble the horses, but also see that every horse's lariat was perfectly knotted.

Early the next morning, a small tribe of Indians attack the camp, rushing down on the camp shouting, beating Indian drums and rattling hides in an endeavor to stampede the horses but every man was standing with his horse's lariat and ready for a shot, thus, only a few horses were lost.

By the time it was light enough to see the surrounding objects a few hundred yards away, the Indians were seen. In Major Forsyth's account of the incident, "The ground seemed to grow with them. They appeared to start out of the very earth. On foot, on horseback, over the hills, out of the thickets, from the bed of the stream from the north, south, east and west, along the bank and out of the long grass on every side of us."

In all, there were approximately 1,000 warriors.

When they saw that they were outnumbered, the scouts were ordered to go to the island, make a circle with their horses, tying them to the bushes. They threw themselves on the ground and, working two men together, tried to throw up the earth to cover themselves. As the Indians attacked, the men shot from beneath their horses.

The Indians saw their error too late as they had not planned on the scouts occupying the island. The attacks were constant and by the end of the day, Lieutenant Beecher was killed, several seriously wounded including the major.

Evidently, the Indians had many killed and injured as the women who had come to watch the scouts slaughtered and chant words of encourage-

ment were not wildly wailing.

As darkness fell, the Indians did not attack, giving the scouts a chance to take care of their wounded, fix something to eat and dig trenches to better cover them from the Indian attacks. All of the horses had been slaughtered but they had taken the bullets meant for the scouts. For the next six day, the scouts would exist on horse flesh, even as it became spoiled, as there was nothing else to eat.

Major Forsyth's account of the battle is very detailed and takes many pages of *The Battle of Beecher Island* book. At one point, he describes the attack made by Roman Nose, the leader of the Indians: "I saw their chief facing his command, and by his gestures, evidently addressing them in a few impassioned words. Then waving his hand in our direction, he turned his horse's head toward us and at the foot of the island.

"As Roman Nose dashed gallantly forward and swept into the open at the head of his superb command, he was a very beau ideal of an Indian chief. Mounted on a large, clean-limbed chestnut horse, he sat well forward on his bare-backed charger, his knees passing under a horsehair lariat that twice loosely encircled the animal's body, his horse's bridle grasped in his left hand which was also closely wound in its flowing mane, and at the same time his rifle, while its barrel, crossing diagonally in front of his body, rested slightly against the hollow of his left arm, leaving his right free to direct the course of his men.

"He was a man of over six feet and three inches in height, beautifully formed and save for a crimson silk sash knotted around his waist and his moccasins on his feet, perfectly naked. His face was hideously painted in alternate lines of red and black and his head crowned with a magnificent war bonnet...."

During this attack, both Roman Nose and the medicine man were killed. The wild shrieks from women and children on the hill had increased.

It should be noted that the Indians rode their mounts with their knees under lariats because, if they were injured or killed, their ponies would carry them off and their enemies would not be able to scalp them. If the Indian lost his scalp, he believed that he would not be allowed to go to the "Happy Hunting Ground."

After the first day of battle, two scouts, walking backward with their feet bound in rags to resemble moccasins and wrapped in blankets to resemble an Indian, were able to escape to go for help over 100 miles away. The second night, two more scouts tried to sneak out but could not find a way. The third night, two more were able to escape and eventually, all brought help but it wasn't until the sixth day of the siege that help arrived. By that time, most of the Indians had left.



MCDONALD was the scene of destructive weather on Thursday evening.

Times staff photo by Casey McCormick

Intense microburst strikes

The McDonald area received damage Thursday evening as a microburst occurred about 7:30 p.m.

The National Weather Service in Goodland reported a cold front moving across the tri-state region helped trigger scattered strong to severe thunderstorms across portions of northwest Kansas.

Wind-driven hail shredded trees, gardens and crops in the vicinity.

Thunderstorm outflow winds estimated at close to 90 miles per hour resulted in damage to grain bins, a trailer home and a large storage building located in the southwest part of town.

Four power poles were snapped on U.S. 36 just west of town, resulting in a power outage lasting several hours in McDonald and Bird City. Tree and shrub damage was

not totally confined to southwest McDonald, but damage intensity diminished considerably just a block to the east. No injuries or fatalities were reported.

The trailer house, belonged to Joice Pedersen. She was staying there, fixing it up. However, she was not in the house at the time of the storm. Bins belonging to the McDonald Equity were damaged and at least one of which had wheat in it.

A building belonging to Duane Wilkens was flattened. A shop belong to George Louderbaugh was damaged.

The Weather Service said strong concentrated downdrafts associated with thunderstorms are often called downbursts, and when these downbursts occur on a scale of about 2 miles or less, they are

termed microbursts.

Microburst winds can produce damage comparable to a tornado, however they are not rated on the EF-scale. Microbursts are thunderstorm outflow winds on a local scale, often resulting from the sudden collapse of a large core of rain and hail within the storm. When this core of rain and hail reaches the surface, winds accelerate outward from the storm, sometimes producing a swath of damage.

One way in which meteorologists distinguish between damage associated with a tornado and that associated with a microburst is the pattern of debris. Microbursts typically display a damage pattern where debris is blown radially outward from the storm. Thunderstorm outflows such as these are also called straight-line winds.



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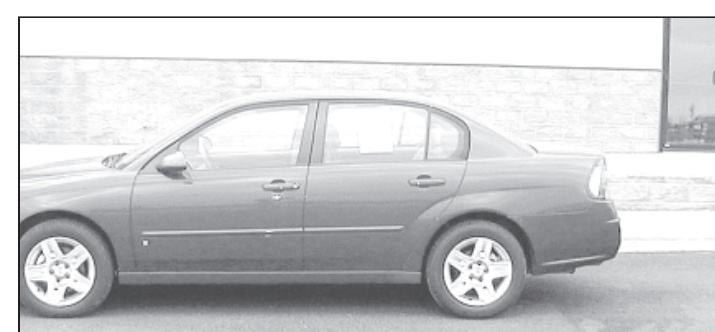
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