

The Little Brother of Civil War

By Jack Shakely

The Indian ball game traditionally played by the Five Civilized Tribes, most notably the Choctaws and Creeks, was so rough and tumble it became known as “The Little Brother of War”. This forerunner of modern lacrosse, with its three-foot long hickory sticks and balls as hard as rocks, had few rules, no substitutions and could last for hours. The way the men played it at least, it could cost a player an eye, some teeth and, occasionally, his life.

The War Between the States, to the surprise of most Americans, was bitterly played out in miniature in Indian Territory, what is now eastern Oklahoma, among these same Five Civilized Tribes. This Little Brother of Civil War was no less deadly or less protracted than the war east of the Mississippi and incredibly, on a percentage of population basis, the Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes suffered more casualties than either the Union or the Confederacy. Fully twenty-five percent of the entire

Indian population in the Territory was killed, wounded or died from disease and starvation by the thousands in refugee camps.

I grew up in Oklahoma and like most students, then and now, remembered the Civil War in Indian Territory, if at all, primarily by the historically insignificant fact that Cherokee Chief Stand Watie was the last Confederate General to surrender, a full two months after Appomattox. I remember our history teacher telling us this with a touch of pride. The fact that the Union army by that time didn't give a damn whether he surrendered or not was lost on us. The vastly more significant set of questions we should have been considering, and one that devastated and haunts the Indian Nations to this day, is why the Five Tribes would make the ruinous, and far from unanimous, decision to join the Confederacy in the first place and what they hoped to gain.

The exact number of Indians in the Civil War is impossible to ascertain, partly because of sloppy record-keeping, multiple enlisting, wholesale desertions and, at least on the Confederate side, wild exaggerations in official documents. Confederate colonels Douglass Cooper and Richard Gano, for example, consistently doubled the estimated number of men under their command in order to gain promotion to general, which both of them eventually secured. When Gano was confronted by his commander General William Steele as to why the troops he had in the field at the Battle of Honey Springs in 1863 appeared to be less than half those he claimed on paper, Gano reported that many of his Indian troops, including an entire Choctaw company, had defected to the Union. Federal army records of the Indian Home Guard make no mention of this Choctaw company, or any Choctaws at all, for that matter.

Based on research for my historical novel *The Confederate War Bonnet*, I estimated that there were approximately 16,000 Indians in the conflict- 6,000 mostly Cherokees with some Creeks and Seminoles in the Federal Indian Home Guard, and some 10,000 Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole soldiers in the Confederacy. The Confederacy had about 100 Indian officers, including the only Indian General Stand Watie, who commanded Indian-only units. The Union Army had no Indian officers.

The Five Civilized Tribes (and that was what they called themselves) didn't so much join the Confederacy as feel pushed into it, completely abandoned by the Union. It is true that the Federals withdrew from Ft. Smith in 1859 and Ft. Gibson the next year, leaving not a single Union soldier in Indian Territory. The Texas Confederates saw this as an excellent opportunity to create a buffer zone between themselves and Yankee Kansas, and immediately sent General Albert Pike, who had been Indian Commissioner before the war and was known and trusted by the Indians, into Indian Territory with gold, guns and promises. The rotund Pike was a masterful orator, a skill highly prized by the Indians, and lived up to his promises, at least in the early months of the war.

It is also true that many of the Indian leaders were still bitter, especially the Cherokees and Creeks who retained vivid recollections of The Removals of 1835-1838, and the humiliation of the Trail of Tears, and the Seminoles who had been at war for decades with the federal government to the point of near-extinction. The old chiefs were still

fighting the last war in their minds when they entered this one. The Confederates were the enemy of their enemy, and therefore their friend.

So the Choctaws, quickly followed by the Chickasaws, joined the Confederacy. Cherokee chief John Ross tried to keep his nation neutral, but firebrand chief Stand Watie, who hated Ross, and Watie's friends William Adair and John Drew joined the Confederate army as officers, taking more than half the Cherokee Nation with them. In an indication of how convoluted and divisive the war was, Drew and his men left the Confederacy a year later and joined the Union army.

Most of the Creeks, under the leadership of Chief Daniel McIntosh and his older brother Chilly, also joined the Confederacy. But it was a hasty decision, and far from unanimous. A significant portion of the Creek Nation, under the leadership of the aging chief Opathle Yohola, refused to join and fled to Kansas and the Union. In one of the many ironies of this tiny war, Opathle Yohola's people were treated as renegades by the federal government and were virtually imprisoned in refugee camps on the Kansas border where, nearly naked and starving, thousands died.

The Civil War in Indian Territory was not a territorial war. Cities were not captured, nations not vanquished, at least in the conventional sense. Only two population centers in the area actually changed hands- Ft. Gibson went from Federal hands to Confederate in 1861, then back to Federal in 1863, and in the autumn of 1863 Ft. Smith fell to the Union, thus securing the Arkansas River as a major supply route for both those locations.

Most of the war was fought up and down what was known as the Texas Road, a mostly north-south cattle trail that cut through Cherokee, Creek and Choctaw lands from Kansas down through present-day Muskogee and McAlester to the Red River and beyond. The Confederate troops eventually concentrated in the southern part of the Choctaw Nation near the Texas border at Ft. Towson, Doaksville and Boggy Depot, and the Federals encamped at Ft. Riley, Kansas, Ft. Gibson and Ft. Smith. Like boxers, they would meet in the middle (which unfortunately was the ravaged and burnt-out Creek Nation), fight furiously and then retire to their corners to bury their dead and treat their wounded.

In battle after battle, the better-trained and more disciplined federal troops overwhelmed the Confederate Indians. The notoriously unreliable Mexican gunpowder used by the Rebel troops hampered the already poorly armed Indians. At Pea Ridge in 1862 and again at Honey Springs in 1863, the Confederate Indian soldiers, armed only with muskets, shotguns and tomahawks, were instructed to fight with whatever rifles they could pick up from the dead. Week after week Confederate Commander Sam Bell Maxey pleaded with Richmond for rifles, cannon and ammunition that, despite assurances to the contrary, never arrived.

The Battle of Honey Springs, also known as the Battle of Elk Creek, which occurred only weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, was the last major pitched battle in Indian Territory. It was a complete defeat of the Confederate army, with more than 1,500 Confederate Indian dead and wounded. The Federal troops, made up largely of the

war-tested and heavily armed African-American Corp d' Afrique, suffered about 500 casualties.

In 1864 and 1865 the Little Brother of Civil War deteriorated into occasional raids and skirmishes, primarily by Stand Watie and his "700 Ragamuffins" against the Union troops holed up at Ft. Gibson. Watie's plan was to destroy all the hay, corn and farm animals for twenty miles surrounding Ft. Gibson, which would eventually demoralize the Federal troops and chase them back to Kansas, leaving him in control of the Cherokee Nation and his beloved Tahlequah. But all Watie's scorched earth efforts succeeded in doing was to prolong the conflict and further starve his own people.

Twice in 1864, just when it looked like the Civil War in Oklahoma was over, Watie scored significant and improbable victories.

The first was in June when Confederate General Maxey heard from spies that the riverboat *J.R. Williams* was steaming up the Arkansas with clothing and food for the beleaguered soldiers at Ft. Gibson. Maxey asked (he had learned better than to command) Watie if he could capture the sternwheeler.

The Federals by this time had so little fear of Confederate interference, they openly published riverboat arrivals and departures in the newspaper *The Era*. All Watie had to do was find out when the *Williams* would leave Ft. Smith and hide in wait when the boat took on wood for fuel.

They caught the boat at Pleasant Bluff, about twenty miles downriver from Ft. Gibson, just at daybreak, June 15. Watie only had two cannons, Parrott guns, but he made them count. The first shot blew the pilothouse to smithereens, and the frightened crew leaped overboard and swam to safety on the far shore, shaken but unharmed.

When Watie's men boarded the *Williams*, they were astonished to find literally thousands of pieces of tin ware- pots and bowls, plates and cups, knives and spoons. This booty proved too great a temptation for the ill-fed and unpaid soldiers and in a scene worthy of a Max Sennett comedy, they tied as many pans and bowls to their horses as they could and disappeared in a cacophony of kitchenware. Unperturbed, Watie and his officers trotted off to their camp in the hills, leaving Creek Captain George Grayson alone to raze the boat.

In September Watie and Texan General Gano struck the last, and most decisive blow against the Federal troops since 1861. In what became known as the Second Battle of Cabin Creek, just below present-day Tulsa, the Confederates overwhelmed a massive wagon train coming down from Ft. Scott with more than one million dollars in gold, thousands of uniforms and hundreds of mules. Although this was called a battle it was, like all conflicts in Indian Territory in the final years of the war, a raid, with very little loss of life on either side. Gano reported losing eight men, with 37 wounded. Gano's Union counterpart, Colonel Henry Hopkins, reported seven dead and eight wounded.

All Cabin Creek really did was to infuriate the humiliated Union army, and it sent its best officer, Colonel William Phillips, back to Ft. Gibson with a thousand fresh troops and more arms and ammunition than at any time since the war broke out. Sensing defeat, General Gano took most of the gold and all of his men back to Texas. Maxey resigned and Watie reverted to his guerrilla tactics, never again to be a factor.

It was clear to all the Indians by 1865 that the Federal army had limitless resources in both men and arms, and that the Confederacy was crumbling around them. So in another stroke of irony, perhaps, the Choctaws and Chickasaws, who had been the first nations to abandon the Union, became the first to sue for peace. Considering their position as the vanquished, these two nations received relatively favorable peace terms and signed a treaty in August 1865. The Cherokees, back under the aging but still powerful John Ross, also signed a treaty in the fall of 1865, although it was not as forgiving. The Cherokees were forced to accept all African-American freedmen as members of the nation, a provision to which they reluctantly agreed and then repudiated 140 years later in 2007.

The hapless Creeks and Seminoles, torn asunder by their own internal civil wars, never were able to speak with one voice and were forced to sign treaties in 1866 that nearly destroyed them as a people. The poor Seminoles were forced to give up all their land and move to a much smaller and less-desirable section of the Territory.

The Little Brother of Civil War was over, but the internal wounds created within the Cherokee, Creek and Seminole Nations took decades to heal. Some historians say they never did.

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