

The Battle of Dove Creek – The Battle That Should Not Have Been

by Tom Ashmore

No-ko-aht was his name. He was a chief of the Kickapoo Indians and it was the fall of 1864. His tribe, some 1700 strong, was about to make their way from Oklahoma to Mexico by passing through Texas. They were going to meet up with others of their tribe already in Mexico, hoping to escape the ‘white’ blood letting of the Civil War. Although the Kickapoo had been involved in fights on both sides of the white man’s Civil War and the previous Indian territorial and trade wars with the French, British, and ‘long knives’, they were not a warring tribe and just wanted to get away from the bloodshed.

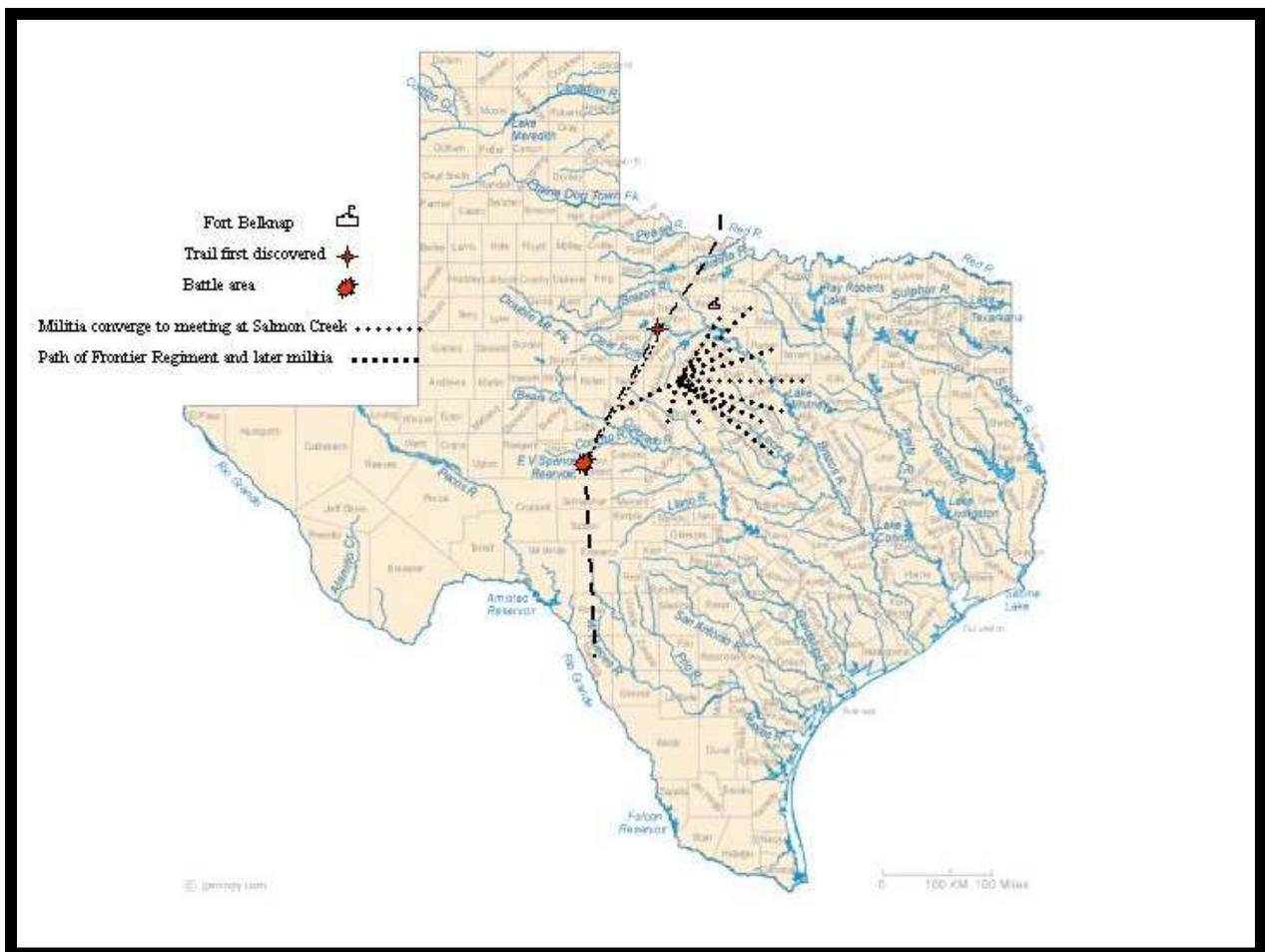


Kickapoo Indian in standard dress similar to the 1865 period

The tribe decided to split into five parties and take different routes. They would avoid Texas settlements by passing through the western unsettled portion of Texas. No-ko-aht’s group and two other parties eventually joined back together in the northern Texas area and took the

most easterly route, just skirting some of the settlements. These three parties numbered about 700 men, women, and children. The other two parties also joined together to make approximately 1000 and took a more westerly route.

Fall turned into a cold December and their movement was slow with the women and children. They had to stop often and hunt buffalo and trap in order to feed such a large group. Their size also made a large trail out on the open plains of northern Texas and on December 9th it was this trail that caught the attention of a State Militia scouting party at a crossing of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River.



Captain Gilentine and his twenty three man scouting party from the Second Frontier District were alarmed to see such a large trail of Indians crossing into Texas territory and reported back to his headquarters of a possible large war party heading southwest into Texas.

His headquarters, in turn, sent an alarm out to the Confederate Frontier Regiment requesting reinforcements. Captain Henry Fossett, located at Camp Colorado, was the senior captain of the Confederate Frontier Regiment, essentially Texas Rangers taken over by the Confederate authority. He was ordered to rendezvous with Captain S.S. Totten, the senior captain of the Texas State Militia. He gathered up about 165 men and proceeded to the rendezvous point to wait.



A Texas Ranger company of the Frontier Battalion, 1885

No-ko-aht and his party arrived in the area of Dove Creek, about 16 miles from present-day San Angelo, on January 1st. It was now bitterly cold and the party needed to rest and replenish their food supply. However, before they made camp they went to visit the Tankersley ranch. Richard Franklin Tankersley was the first settler in this area and was known to the Kickapoo from previous trips through the area. At first Tankersley thought the Indians to be hostile. As No-ko-aht rode up to him Tankersley drew down on him with his revolver. No-ko-aht waived a white flag and said, “me no fight.” After explaining their intentions Tankersley invited the Kickapoo to stay as long as they needed and a few days later they repaid his generosity. According to Tankersley’s son, “They were very friendly and in scouting some days later, found some of our horses which had strayed off and brought them home.”



R. F. TANKERSLEY

Back at the rendezvous point Captain Fossett became impatient waiting for Capt Totten. It took some time to gather the local volunteers that eventually number around 350 from all the various counties in the area who were to converge on Camp Salmon before moving to join Captain Fossett and they were two days late. Fossett decided not to wait any longer and pushed down the trail with his small group of men.

Apparently, Fossett was spoiling for a fight because when his men were later questioned they all stated the evidence of items left behind gave them the impression that these were not unfriendly Indians. This should have been very easy to tell since the frontier fighting units had been guarding against and trailing hostile Apache, Kiowa, and Comanche Indians for quite a number of years. They even found a grave of a little Indian girl of two or three that had died along the way and exhumed it. They noted the grave was similar to graves prepared by whites and the child was “well and tastefully dressed.”

Captain Fossett’s scouts located the Kickapoo party camped on Dove Creek on January 7th. Fossett stopped at the Tankersley ranch inquiring about the Indians. Apparently, Tankersley tried to convince him the Indians were friendly. However, Fossett was not interested, stating that they had a large number of fine horses, which would be of more value to the Confederacy than their friendship. Fossett continued on to within three miles of the Indian camp before stopping to plan the attack.

Fossett wanted to attack immediately but was encouraged to send a runner back to the militia, now 35 miles behind, ordering them to make all haste to join in the upcoming battle. At 9 o'clock that evening he made a temporary camp three miles from the Indian camp to wait for the militia to arrive.

With Fossett was a Lieutenant Mulkey, an old Indian guide of Indian descent, born and raised in the Cherokee Nation. He was well acquainted with Indian character and habits and informed Fossett he believed this band of Indians to be Kickapoo and they were probably friendly. He also suggested they attempt to communicate with them before attacking. Lieutenant Mulkey's guidance fell on deaf ears. Fossett stated, "I recognize no friendly Indians on the Texas frontier."

Upon receiving the dispatch from Capt Fossett, Captain Totten broke camp immediately to ride all night to join in the battle. He arrived at 8 o'clock in the morning with a bedraggled group in no condition for a fight. They had a hasty conference in which Fossett insisted on an immediate assault.

The plan was to split the forces into two groups. The militia would dismount and make a frontal assault on the Indian camp from the north by crossing the creek. The Confederate force would maneuver around to the west, capture their horses and attack the camp from the south.

The Indians were initially caught by surprise by the militia's assault, but quickly set up fighting positions, using the cover of the creek, draws, and live oak thickets in the area. What neither of the captains knew was that although these Indians were not looking for a fight they were battle hardened from their time in Oklahoma and Kansas and all their warriors were marksmen with the new Enfield muskets they carried with them. The Enfield was a rifled musket, capable of grouping its shots into a 4 inch circle at 100 yards and could hit a man at 600 yards. The 500 grain bullet could penetrate 4 inches of timber at 1000 yards.



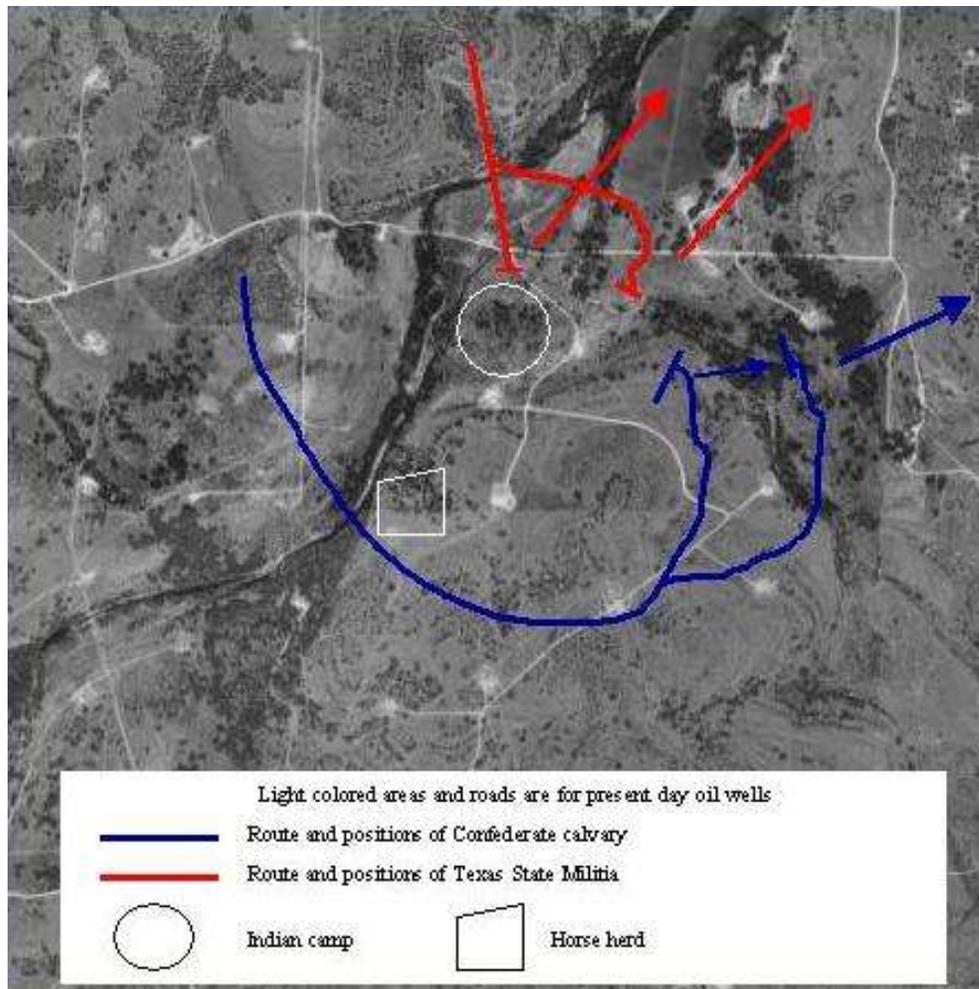
The **Enfield 1853 Rifled Musket** (also known as the **Pattern 1853 Enfield**, **P53 Enfield**, and **Enfield Rifled Musket**)

Still wanting to avoid a fight the Indians sent an Indian squaw out to the militia as a peace messenger. Captain Totten, rejecting the peace offer, killed the woman and the fight was on. However, instead of stampeding from the onslaught the Indians stood their ground, showing their bravery and marksmanship. The militia was also at a distinct disadvantage trying to assault an entrenched enemy. By some accounts 18 militia were killed and 14 were wounded in the first few minutes of the assault. From No-ko-aht's account: "A good many were killed on both sides. When we drove them to one side another force came in behind us. Then we whipped the second party back and the third one attacked us and we fired on them. We killed a good many of the first party, a few of the second and none of the third."

Captain Fossett had no trouble capturing the horses, as only an old man and two young boys were watching them. They captured the three and took them to Fossett. The old man's name was Aski and he tried to tell Fossett the tribe was friendly and if they would talk to the chief "all things would be made satisfactory." Fossett told the Indian he recognized no friendly Indians in Texas. Aski then replied that he must then be his prisoner. Fossett replied, "We take no prisoners here" and Aski was executed. Fossett also ordered the children shot, but the men refused and they were taken prisoner.

By the time Fossett's men began their attack the militia was in full retreat with a good number of Kickapoo behind them. Fossett's men were also soon routed from their flanking position and pushed into the draws along the creek. They fought all day and retreated at

sundown to take stock of their losses. They apparently suffered five men killed and a number wounded. In all the two forces suffered 25 were killed and 60 wounded, many of which died later during a bitterly cold march back through a deep snow.



No-ko-aht reported 15 killed, two of those being Aski and the squaw and another being a young boy. The two young prisoners escaped their captors during the battle. Although they lost most of their horses the Indians left immediately to get to Mexico, many on foot. They left most of their possessions behind. It was a battle that embittered the Kickapoo for many years to come as they made cross border raids from Mexico into Texas looking for retribution.

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<http://www.freewebs.com/kickapoofive/>

Tom Ashmore is retired from the Air Force and currently resides in Dove Creek.