

In the first few months of the Civil War, the North discovered that it was faced with a serious cotton shortage. No longer could cotton be purchased from the Southern states and hungry textile mills of the North needed cotton in order to produce. Union politicians, civilian interest groups, and the military decided that if the State of Texas could be occupied by Union forces, they could grow cotton to supply the empty mills of the North. ...A plan was drawn.

Major General Nathaniel P. Banks was to sail from New York, enter

Steele followed a route which roughly parallels today's Interstate 30. His Union forces crossed the Ouachita River at Rockport (near where the Interstate crosses the river at Malvern) and continued southwest, toward Texas.

Steele's army first encountered heavy resistance at the crossing of the Little Missouri

His army camped at White Oak Creek, 18 miles west of Camden on the night of the 12th; then, after a 2-hour skirmish, marched toward Camden. The Federals entered the city with little difficulty on April 13, 1864.

The Battle of Poison Spring

Steele's army included some 13,000 men, 9,000 horses and mules, 800 wagons, and 30 pieces of artillery. Supplying this army was proving to

be a major problem. Steele later wrote that his supplies were nearly exhausted and so was the country. With men on half-rations for almost three weeks, it was almost impossible to enforce the commander's orders against unauthorized foraging.

On April 17, a train of 198 wagons was sent westward along the Upper Washington Road to collect corn and other foodstuffs. After loading the wagons with corn, they camped 18 miles west of Camden. At sunup they began the march to Camden. Soon, they received reinforcements bringing the total force to 875 infantry (including the First Kansas Colored), 90 cavalry troopers, and a four gun battery of artillery including two mountain howitzers, and two rifled cannon.

The Confederates, observing this movement, gathered some 3100 cavalry and eight cannon under Brigadier Generals Samuel B. Maxey and John S. Marmaduke. The enemy was met about 14 miles west of Camden at a place known as Poison Spring. The Confederates under Maxey blocked the Union advance and together he and Marmaduke attacked the front and south flank of the long forage train.

Several times the Federals tried to make a stand, only to be pushed back beyond the stalled train. After a fierce battle, including a furious charge by a regiment of Confederate Choctaw Indians, the Federals broke in rout and were pursued for about two miles.

(The train was stalled along present-day Highway 79 on the south side of the state park. Fighting took place along both sides of the road.)

The Confederates captured the four cannon, complete with limbers and caissons, 170 wagons (the others

The RED RIVER CAMPAIGN

in Arkansas



the Red River in Louisiana and join a Union force marching south from Little Rock. Together the two columns would invade Texas and secure the area for the North. The plan was to be called The Red River Expedition. It was not until 1864, however, that the plan was put into effect.

In September of 1863, Major General Fredrick Steele, with 20,000 men, had advanced from Helena and captured Little Rock. The Arkansas state government fled to the southwestern part of the state, settling in the Hempstead County Courthouse at Washington, Arkansas. On March 23, 1864, General Steele left Little Rock to join General Banks in the Red River region of Louisiana, and begin the invasion of Texas.

River where a bloody affair took place between Steele's leading division and 3,000 Confederate dismounted cavalry. Further south on Prairie De Ann, near Prescott, the entire Confederate force dug in. A day and a half of hard fighting was needed to dislodge the outnumbered Rebels.

The fighting at Prairie De Ann slowed Steele, and spring rains had begun. The dirt roads turned into a quagmire. After two weeks of marching Steele had covered only 70 miles, and Confederate resistance was strengthening, particularly around Washington, the Confederate state capital. General Steele decided to alter his plans and turn east toward Camden instead of proceeding directly to Shreveport.

being burned) and teams, took over 100 prisoners, and buried 181 Federal troops. According to a Southern officer, the wagons contained:

...corn, bacon, stolen bed quilts, women's and children's clothing, hogs, geese and all the et ceteras of unscrupulous plunder.

301 Union soldiers were listed as killed or missing. Additionally, the loss created much indignation in the Union camp as well as aggravating the critical supply situation.

Confederate losses were relatively small with 111 killed, wounded, or missing.

The victory at Poison Spring, along with the arrival of General E. Kirby Smith with three infantry divisions, and the report of the defeat of Union General Banks in Louisiana, raised Confederate hopes that they could cut off the supply lines and capture the entire Union army.

The Battle of Marks' Mills

On April 20, a Union supply train from Pine Bluff arrived with 10 days' half-rations. On April 23, Confederate General Shelby crossed the Ouachita River to raid Union supply routes. The following day General Fagan learned that the Union supply train had left Camden under heavy guard, returning to Pine Bluff.

Fagan immediately selected a crack force of four brigades of cavalry and set off to intercept this prize. After a forced march of 52 miles, he crossed the Ouachita River at Moro Bay and headed north toward the junction of the Camden, Mount Elba and Pine Bluff roads (near the present junction of Highways 8 and 97 east of Fordyce).

The Union wagon train included 240 government wagons and a number of private vehicles. It was guarded by three full regiments of infantry, 240 cavalry, and 4 pieces of artillery, in all some 1600 men, not including the First Iowa Cavalry which remained out of the battle.

Using tactics similar to those

employed at Poison Spring, the Confederates blocked the Union advance, then, around 9:30 AM, attacked the flank of the wagon train. The battle lasted 5 hours with the main unit of Confederates entering the battle dismounted and in piecemeal order, then the mounted Missourians charged from the north and mounted Arkansans from the south, sealing the fate of the Federal force. The Confederates successfully

subdued the two lead Union regiments, then the rear guard, and finally scattered 500 veterans

of the 1st Iowa who were marching a few miles behind the main column en route home on furlough.

About 1600 Union troops were engaged in battle against 2500 Confederates. Union losses could not have been less than 1300, the majority being captured. Southern losses were fewer than 500, including those slightly wounded. The victors found themselves with the entire train, some 1500 horses and mules, private vehicles, ambulances, four guns, and valuable official reports concerning Steele's army.

The Battle of Jenkins' Ferry

In Camden, General Steele had to decide what was to be done before his command was immobilized by a breakdown in transportation and the consumption of his few remaining supplies. There seemed to be but one alternative to starvation and capture—an immediate retreat to Little Rock.

Early on April 26, 1864, Steele slipped out of Camden toward Little Rock. He chose to follow the Camden Trail which crossed the Saline River at Jenkins' Ferry. The road was built before 1836 and served as one of the five main or "trunk roads" in Arkansas.

(To retrace Steele's route from Camden to Jenkins' Ferry State Park, follow Highway 79 to Eagle Mills, then 9 through Princeton and Tulip, then 46 through Leola to the park.)

By 9 AM on April 27, upon learning that Steele had left Camden, the Confederate Army, under Generals E. Kirby Smith and Sterling Price, occu-

pied the city and headed north after the Union column. If a Confederate force could get ahead of Steele and cut him off before he reached the Jenkins' Ferry on the Saline River, perhaps the entire army could be destroyed.

On April 29, 1864, after three days of forced marching through heavy rains, Steele arrived in Sandy Springs (now the community of Leola). Here he found formidable opposition, not from the approaching Confederates, but from the flooded river which lay in his path:

On either side of the Saline River was a low, marshy swamp covered in varying depths of water. Rain had been falling for several hours and the road which followed Cox Creek to the river was a sea of mud.

The river was rising rapidly and Cox Creek was bank full. On either side of the swamp, ridges of high ground provided a sense of security before plunging onto the muddy road below.

Colonel Aldoph Engleman, a Union brigade commander, described the area in his diary:

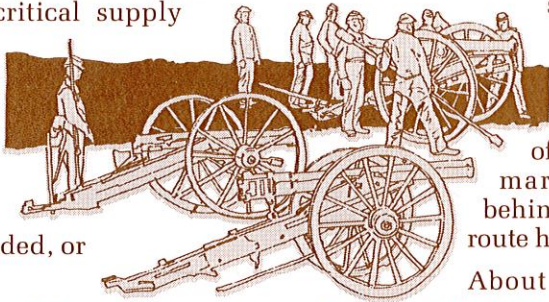
The ground, with the exception of an open field near the road, was a majestic forest growing out of the swamp which was very difficult to pass through on horseback, the infantry being most of the time in the water up to their knees.

Confederate General Mosby M. Parsons wrote:

The road descended from the highlands to the valley of the Saline River. To the front was a plowed field about a quarter of a mile square which was flanked on the south and east by heavy timber. Still farther to the front and about a quarter of a mile was another field about the same dimension as the first, an intervening strip of woods separating the two. This field, as the first, was bounded on the south and east all the way to the river by heavy woods and wet marshes.

It was into this swamp that Steele's ill-fated wagon train was forced to enter. An India rubber pontoon bridge was set up at the ferry site and the army began to cross, one wagon at a time. Because of the heavy weight of the wagons and the poor condition of the road, the train bogged down in the mire stretching all the way from Sandy Springs to the river. Despite this difficulty, Steele managed to get his cavalry, artillery, and most of his wagons across the Saline River by 8 AM. It was at this point that the Confederates arrived on the scene.

Steele immediately sent his men back



down the Camden Trail to the rear of the slowly moving train to engage the enemy. The Battle of Jenkins' Ferry had begun.

R.M. Rogers, a Confederate soldier who later became treasurer of Grant County, remembers his April 30th encounter with Steele's Federals:

Our army had reached a small house about two miles from Jenkins' Ferry. This is known as the Jiles farm. We were ordered into a line of battle. This gave an opportunity for reflection. My thoughts went back to my childhood. When these thoughts passed through my mind I then thought of my present condition, a poor soldier worn out by fatigue of hard marching through heavy rain, mud and water without a moment's rest, suffering from hunger, now standing in battle rank waiting for orders to move into a dreadful battle. Tears came streaming down my cheeks. I could restrain my feelings no longer. Just as we were about to move forward I took a small piece of old bread for my breakfast

toon bridge at Jenkins' Ferry, the battle moved from field to field along the Camden Trail toward the Saline River.

Lieutenant Colonel Aldoph Dingler of the 43rd Illinois reported the action:

We poured volley after volley into the thick masses of the enemy. After firing had lasted some half an hour, the smoke became so dense, waving like a thick fog between the dark trees over the swampy ground, that it was impossible to see anything at a distance of 20 yards.

Colonel John A. Garrett of the 40th Iowa Infantry described the battle on the part of the Union Army:

I moved my command forward against the advancing Confederates; the line now advancing, making short halts, then moving forward. After advancing a short distance we began to pass over the enemy dead. My men moved right on with a shout, pouring a well-directed fire on the retreating enemy. My men, out of cartridges,

days. They had a coffee supper on the night of the 29th and a coffee breakfast.

As Smith's Confederates continued to push down the Camden Trail through the muddy woods, they met stubborn resistance. A Confederate private with Walker's Texas Division related:

An incessant roar of musketry prevailed for about six hours. During this time the tide of battle ebbed and flowed, now advancing then retreating, but at no time did the ground fought over vary more than about 250 yards. Owing to the dense fog and dense clouds of smoke which hung in the thick woods, many times opposing lines could only be discovered by the flash of their muskets.

Had we received reinforcements we could have destroyed the entire train and perhaps have captured the entire army. The Federal troops fought well and were handled in a masterly manner.

It was in the Jiles, Cooper and Kelley fields that both sides sustained most of their casualties. Generals as well as privates fell on both sides. Confederate Brigadier General William R. Scurry fell on the field. Colonel and acting brigade commander Horace Randal, Colonel Hiram Lane Grinstead of the 33rd Arkansas Infantry, and Union General Samuel A. Rice were mortally wounded.

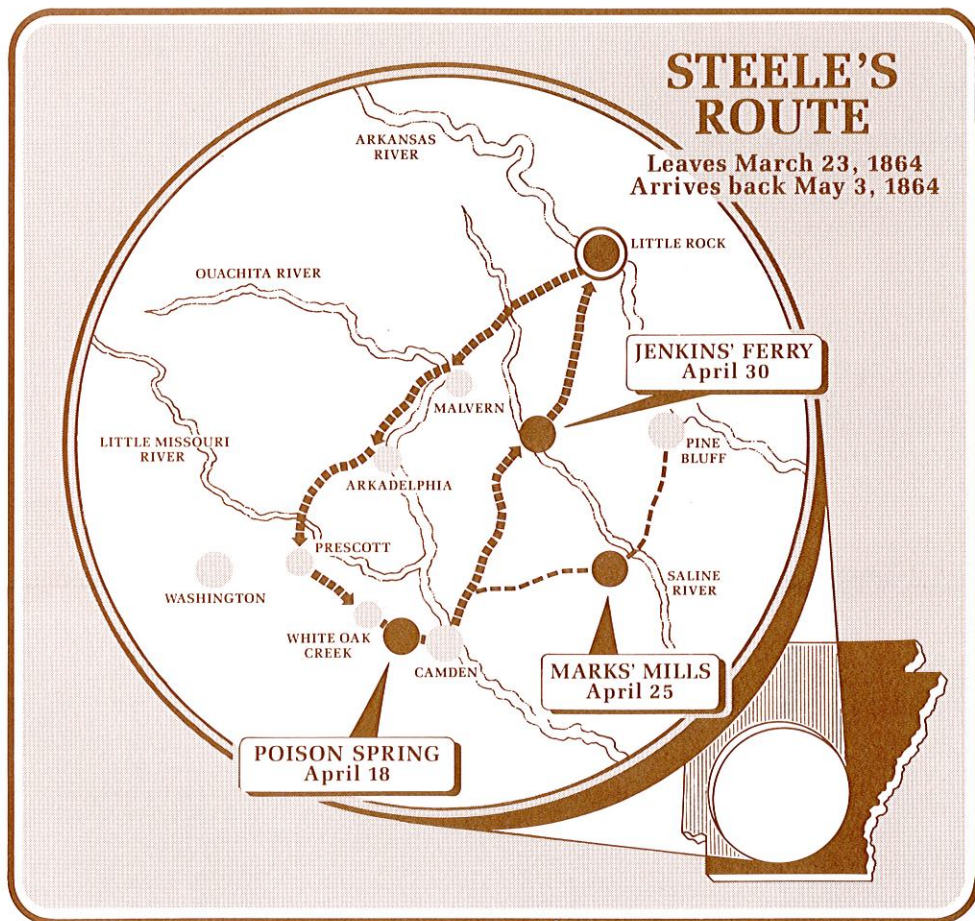
A Confederate private remembered the battlefield after the fighting ceased:

After the battle a detail of men were employed in burying the dead. Armed with shovel, pick ax, and spade they proceeded along the road to complete this mournful task which the enemy was unable to accomplish.

The ground was thickly strewn with ghastly, mangled forms. It was almost too horrible for human endurance. No conception of the imagination, no power of human language could do justice to such a horrible scene.

The Union Army, by this time, had managed to cross the river at Jenkins' Ferry. Steele destroyed his India rubber pontoon bridge and floated it down the river. Unfortunately, the bottom on the north side of the river was worse and the train promptly bogged down again. The Confederates were unable to immediately cross the river giving Steele needed time for his retreat.

By abandoning those wagons stuck in the mud, the train managed to reach the security of the high ground north of the river. Moving hurriedly from the high ground toward Little Rock, Steele ordered all unnecessary bag-



and marched down into that dreadful conflict.

Steele's rear guard collided with Smith's Confederates in the Jiles' field. The Confederates launched a series of violent but piecemeal attacks along the entire Federal line. As the train slowly moved across the pon-

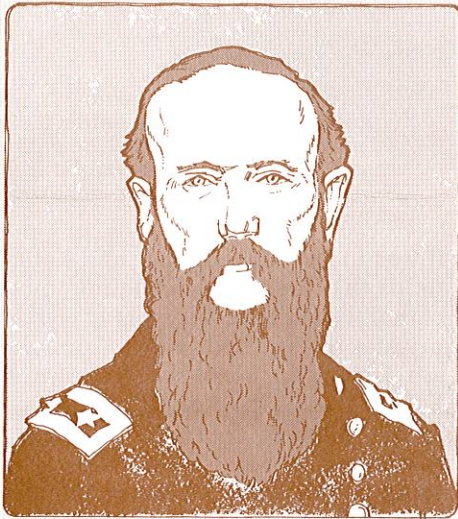
now resupplied themselves from boxes brought in on horseback which they opened with their bayonets. The battle was fought in a swamp covered by a heavy forest. Mud and sheets of water were everywhere.

My men held their ground firing from 60 to 100 rounds each. I may state that my men had drawn no bread for five

gage destroyed. Wagons, ammunition, clothing, and other supplies were dumped along the road. Whenever a wagon was fired or stuck, most all of its contents were thrown into the water and mud.

A veteran of the Jenkins' Ferry battle remembered this phase of the expedition:

All along the road for miles were burning wagons, their contents thrown over a wide area. If all the cartridges that were sown that day should bear fruit, even sixty-fold, there would never be peace anymore.



Major General Fredrick Steele

Despite Confederate resistance and the poor condition of the road, the Union Army arrived in Little Rock on May 3rd. Steele was now out of danger, but he had paid a high price for the consolation. He had lost 635 wagons, 2,500 horses and mules, and 2,750 casualties in the campaign. He had employed about 4,000 men in the battle of Jenkins' Ferry. Of those about

800 were killed or wounded.

The Red River Expedition was over. The Arkansas and Louisiana phases had been failures. Banks was pushed back in Louisiana and Steele was driven back in Arkansas. The Southwest region of Arkansas remained in Confederate hands until the end of the war.

As you retrace General Steele's route, you'll want to visit **Old Washington State Park**. In addition to being the capital of Confederate Arkansas during the latter years of the Civil War, Washington played an important role in the formative periods of both Arkansas and Texas. Today Washington is a restored village with programs, tours and museums.

West of Camden you'll find **White Oak Lake State Park**. It was near here that Steele's troops camped prior to occupying Camden. The park has beautiful, shaded campsites on the lake with water and electric hook-ups, and is an excellent location from which to explore the Poison Spring battlefield and the many historic homes in Camden.

Poison Spring, Marks' Mills and Jenkins' Ferry are historic state parks with picnic areas and interpretive markers. Camping is not available at these sites. **NOTICE: To preserve scenic beauty and ecology, fences and warning signs have not been installed in some park locations. Caution, and supervision of your children, are required while visiting these areas.**

After visiting Jenkins' Ferry be sure to

visit the Grant County Museum in Sheridan. Here you'll learn more of this swampy battle through programs, exhibits and artifacts from the battle.

For more information on the many confrontations which took place during the Red River Campaign you'll want to read Steele's Retreat From Camden and the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry, by Edwin C. Bearss; and The Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War, by Ludwell H. Johnson. Both give excellent descriptions of the battles, the lives, and the decisions of the campaign.

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The **RED** **RIVER** **CAMPAIGN** *in Arkansas*

Poison Spring, Marks' Mills, and Jenkins' Ferry Battlefield State Parks are small, remote sites in South Arkansas, however, they have a special historical significance. Their story begins with the onset of the Civil War...