

Deadly confrontation in Utah took place shortly before GJ incorporated



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By Kathy Jordan

Pinhook Battle. Sounds like something that “Pirates of the Caribbean” would be involved in on the high seas.

But this Pinhook Battle has nothing to do with pirates or the Caribbean.

Pinhook Battleground is the Southeastern Utah site of the largest and most tragic Indian-White confrontation ever in terms of numbers killed.

The Pinhook Battle took place on June 15, 1881, just three months before the City of Grand Junction incorporated and the Meeker Massacre had been fought two years before.

In 1940 Jordan Bean, the only remaining survivor of the Pinhook Battle, recounted the event in a letter to the Moab Times-Independent.

Trouble between the cattlemen and Indians began at Burnt Cabin Springs, approximately 35 miles west of Dolores, about two weeks before the battle on the northwest side of the La Sal Mountains.

Bean wrote that for years the cattlemen and ranchmen had suffered many losses from the attacks of the Piutes, or Renegade Indians, who would leave their reservation and roam at will over southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah.

According to Bean, John Thurman and Dick May owned about 200 head of horses at which the Indians had “looked with longing eyes for months,” as the horses grazed in the Burnt Cabin District.

When a small bunch of cattlemen and ranchers from the Dolores and Mancos area found Thurman and May murdered, their badly burned bodies in the cabin, and all their horses gone, they concluded that the Indians were the culprits.

They reasoned that Indians had been known to steal horses from southwestern Colorado settlers and drive them to western San Juan County, Utah, which the Indians claimed as their land.

In those early days, the area was sparsely settled, and it took several days to organize a posse to follow the Indians.

Rico was a booming mining camp then, and as soon as word reached the camp, a posse was organized there, composed chiefly of miners, prospectors and freighters.

Another posse of cattlemen and ranchers from Mancos, Disappointment and Dolores was organized at Dolores. Captain Dawson of Disappointment was made captain, while Billy May, a brother of Dick May, was selected as aide.

A posse of approximately 30 cattlemen, splitting into two groups, began their search on June 1, 1881.

The group under Dawson’s command overtook the Piutes on June 15, 1881, at Mill Creek on the La Sals, and the running battle across Wilson Mesa and into Pinhook was under way. The battle raged on for a second day, and the posse was pinned down for the night.

The next morning the posse discovered that the Indians had left in the night. Apparently the Indians had made plans for a getaway in case they got into a fight with a posse of federal troops. The Indians had vanished to parts unknown, leaving their worn-out ponies, goats and two dead warriors on the battleground.

After leaving Burnt Springs cabin the Indians went to Dodge Springs where they left their squaws, papooses and old men. On their way to Dodge Springs, near where Monticello now stands, the Indians stole another bunch of horses owned by Spud Hudson.

Meanwhile May and his men were looking for a trail off the rim of Little Castle Valley to find a route to head off the Indians. They arrived at the battlefield too late to help the Dawson group.

According to Bean, old pioneers thought that one Indian who might be involved was Posey, leader of the Utes, but no one knew for sure, and no one was ever punished.

Bean wrote that some posse members who followed the Indians' trail some distance believed that a number of Indians had been wounded, as there were "many bloody rags along the trail and no doubt they carried away some of their dead".

The Whites buried their dead near where they had fallen on the battleground. Dead posse members were Hard Tartar, John B. Galloway, Wiley Tartar, Hiram Melvin, Jimmy Heaton and George Taylor, all of Rico; Tom Click of Dolores; Dave Willis of Mancos; and Alfred Wilson and Isadore Wilson, both of Moab, Utah.

The wounded were: Jordan Bean of Dolores; Jim Hall of Rico; and Harge Eskridge of Durango and Rico.

In 1940 Grand County and the Moab Lions Club erected a concrete monument at the site of the common grave in Pinhook Valley where the remains of eight of the 13 dead white men were buried. The area was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.