

The Death and Burial of Willie Price

Have you ever been to the Corinth National Cemetery? It's a beautiful spot, shady and green grass and row upon row of white marble headstones. It's an active cemetery so there are plenty of recent burials, but the majority of the graves date back to the Civil War era.

The cemetery was established in 1866, the year after the war ended, and all of the Union soldiers in the area were reinterred from their war-time graves. These guys were the dead from the Battle of Corinth as well as any number of other smaller fights like those at Brice's Crossroads, Tupelo and Parker's Crossroads.

There are the forty-five graves of the Northern soldiers killed at Davis Bridge, Tennessee, on the 5th of October, 1862. They were buried the day after the battle on the east bank of the Hatchie River and, like the others, were moved to the cemetery after the war. One is missing, however; there should have been forty-six.

The fight at Davis Bridge was a brutal one. In the morning all the work was done on the west bank of the river and it all favored the Union. Around noon the Confederates retreated across the Davis Bridge and made a stand on the high ground on the opposite bank. The afternoon was a different story and the Southerners had the upper hand.

There's a dog leg turn in the Hatchie River as it meanders towards the site of the old bridge crossing. The Federals didn't know about it and through a series of bad orders and bad luck, about 2,000 men got trapped in a position too small for a quarter of that number. For the Confederates on the heights it was like shooting fish in a barrel.

One of the fish was 2nd Lieutenant Willie Price of the 53rd Illinois Infantry.

William Delano Price was all of eighteen years old when he enlisted in the army. When he was 16 he had applied to West Point but without a politician for a friend he never stood a chance of securing a spot. But Private Willie Price was a quick study and soon he was Sergeant Willie Price and eventually a Lieutenant.

His regiment left Illinois and arrived at the Battle of Shiloh shortly after the last shot was fired. Their baptism of fire would be during the Siege of Corinth, in May

of '62, and later they were sent to serve as part of the garrison force at Memphis and then Bolivar.

Early on the morning of October 4th the 53rd Illinois set out with a Union column marching out of Bolivar to relieve the embattled Federals at Corinth. At the Hatchie River they ran into the retreating Confederate army under General Van Dorn and the Battle of Davis Bridge was begun.

When the 53rd Illinois ran across the bridge and into the death-trap on the eastern bank, Willie was the lowest ranking of three officers in Company A. But his captain could not be found (he was rumored to be drunk) and the 1st Lieutenant was away with the Colonel. Willie found himself commanding the company in a no-win scenario.

There was a very slight embankment on the field, the old riverbank from the days before the Hatchie had changed its course. Willie got his men to hunker down behind the scant cover, no more than three feet high, and undoubtedly he saved many a life. With his sword in his hand he called out, "There they are boys – give it to them!" They were Willie's last words.

"I saw him as the moment the bullet struck him," recalled Sergeant Sam Baldwin, "taking effect in his right side and coming out under the left arm. He fell and died without a struggle."

The fight went on for a few more hours and eventually the Confederates pulled away and crossed the Hatchie a few miles upstream at Crum's Mill.

There were over a thousand men killed, wounded, and captured during the day long fight. The Union dead were buried by their comrades on the east bank of the river, just under the heights that proved so deadly to them.

Willie was buried in his uniform with his hat over his face and was doubled over in a fetal position. He was wrapped in a blanket and set into the grave which was lined, top and bottom, with rails from a nearby fence. Vines were placed over the rails to prevent dirt from reaching the body. Next to him lay the other nine men of his regiment killed that day.

Upon the return to Bolivar Captain Wright telegraphed the sad news to the Price family in Ottawa, Illinois. 1st Sergeant Patrick Ryan presumed the family would want to recover Willie's body and sent Mr. Price a detailed letter on how to find the battlefield and his son's burial site.

“At the north side of the grave lays a large fallen tree running parallel with the grave. You will find at the foot of the grave on the butt of an old stump the letters W.D.P., if the headboard should be destroyed, you cannot fail to find him.”

Mr. William Price arrived in West Tennessee a week later with a wagon and found the body of his son. He placed Willie in a metallic coffin and made the journey to Bolivar where he loaded the remains of his son onto a train. On October 16th all of Company A, along with Brigadier General Jacob Lauman, came to the depot to bid a final good bye to the young lieutenant.

It was well that William Price made the effort. Four years later, when the remaining nine men of the 53rd Illinois were moved to Corinth, only three could be identified. The wooden headboards had deteriorated and there was no way to tell who was who.

Those soldiers are resting in the Corinth National Cemetery in “unknown” graves with just a small marble stone and a number to remember them. Young men, like Willie Price, who gave there all for their country.