

The Cannon that's not in the River

Several years ago I wrote an article for Blue & Gray Magazine titled "Hell on the Hatchie: The Fight at Davis Bridge, Tennessee." I made dozens of trips out to the battle site, got stung by mosquitoes the size of parakeets, and carried home whole species of ticks and chiggers; and loved every minute of it. One of the best parts of the field trips to Hardeman County was talking to the local folks who lived on or near the battlefield. They were friendly, helpful, full of wonderful information and willing to walk the field with me. They were also amazed that I did not believe the story of the cannon in the river.

The fight at Davis Bridge (it was too small to be classified as a battle) took place on the October 5th, the day after the Battle of Corinth. General Van Dorn's army was in full retreat and the path to safety led across the Hatchie River at Davis Bridge. The army had passed over the river just three days earlier and had left a long line of supply wagons behind so the column could march faster. It was essential for Van Dorn to return for the wagons as they were filled with the supplies needed to feed his army.

When the wagons had been left behind a thousand men were ordered to serve as a guard over the wagons and mules. Four cannon were left as well. These artillery pieces were the bronze 12 pounder howitzers of Captain William Dawson's St. Louis Battery.

On the morning of October 5th a Union relief column appeared out of the west and Dawson's Battery was rolled over Davis Bridge and took up a defensive position in the yard of farmer Willie Davis. It wasn't a very good position to fight from. The land was flat as a billiard table except for Matamora Ridge to the west where the enemy was located.

The odds didn't look so good for the Confederates. There were 6,000 Federals with 16 cannon on the hill and only 1,000 men and four pieces of artillery for the home team. Van Dorn was moving up with about 15,000 men but they were stretched out for miles along the road and would not be of much help for a few hours.

The fight started out with the artillery blasting away at each other for about an hour. The contest wasn't even close. With the advantage of the high ground the Union was able to drop shells among Dawson's cannon and the men began to fall at an alarming rate. A horse makes a bigger target than a man and in the hour long fight every one of the battery horses was killed or wounded. That meant fifty horses were down, leaving no way to move the heavy cannons.

The first Confederate reinforcements arrived in time to meet the enemy charging headlong down the slope. They could not hold back the blue tide and in a flash the Southerners were sent reeling back across the bridge. When the dust settled it was found that over 400 men had been captured. . .and, with no way to haul them away, all four of the big, bronze howitzers.

The fighting lasted a few more hours and over the next few days all of the dead were buried and the wounded carted off. Peace and quiet returned to the little piece of West Tennessee.

It was out of this fight that a myth emerged, a story of a cannon abandoned and tossed into the river.

There have been plenty of people who have claimed to have seen it in “the cannon hole” just upriver from the old bridge site. I talked to a gentleman who said he used to dive off the end of it into the river when he was a boy and another who said he used to catch fish out of the barrel. I’m not saying these are tall tales, I believe that they are telling the truth. I’m just not convinced it was not a big section of pipe they were playing on.

Why would I say such a thing? Well, first off, it would have to be a mighty small fish to come out of the barrel of a cannon. The muzzle diameter of a 12 pounder howitzer is only 4.62 inches, pretty small for catching anything bigger than a minnow. The same fellow said the barrel was badly corroded and red with rust. Again there is a problem; bronze does not rust. When it is exposed to oxygen it will turn green but it will not corrode.

Another fellow told of trying to haul the barrel out with a length of chain that was passed through the barrel. But a civil war howitzer was a muzzle loader and only had an opening on one end. There was no way to pass a chain or anything else through the length of the barrel.

On another visit I came across two men in wet suits who had been metal detecting the river. They came away with a few beer cans and a bullet but no cannon. By the way, such activity is now illegal and a Tennessee State Park Ranger lives on the field and keeps a weather eye out for such shenanigans.

At any rate, the four captured howitzers became property of the U.S. Army and were hauled away to Bolivar. Maybe it was a cannon from a different battery? There were other skirmishes in the vicinity during the war but none of them involved artillery. There are no records or stories about anyone abandoning a big gun in the Hatchie. Besides, you just didn’t throw away a perfectly good cannon. If it was broke it could usually be fixed. It was the equivalent of a modern main battle tank and not lightly discarded.

So when I’m asked if I have ever heard of the cannon in the Hatchie I smile and nod. Nobody throws a cannon into the water. Unless, of course, you want to talk about the bronze cannon thrown into Cane Creek during the Battle of Corinth. Now there’s a story.