

The Last Battle of the Civil War—Palmito Ranch

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Union forces that had been occupying Fort Brown since November 6, 1863 withdrew to Brazos Island on July 28, 1864. Ostensibly this was to transfer some of the troop to confront Confederate holdouts in Alabama. Left on the island were about 1,200 Union soldiers, many of them in the Negro engineering units.

There was to be one last major military engagement in the LRGV. When the end of the Confederacy was evidenced in March 1865," local Confederate commanders, Brig. Gen. James E. Slaughter and Col. John S. Ford accepted Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace's invitation to meet at Point Isabel on March 6 to discuss terms of peace. [Slaughter, in November 1864, had established the Western Sub District Headquarters in Brownsville.] An informal truce was established and a formal peace seemed at hand." Wallace had wined and dined his guests with \$600 of vittles and libations. The meeting was amiable. John Warren Hunter, a teamster who had brought cotton to Brownsville then took refuge in Matamoros to avoid conscription, provides the background behind Wallace's actions. He relates: "Gen. Lew Wallace of the *Ben Hur* fame, convinced Gen. Grant that he could obtain the surrender of the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department if given a free hand to make contact and spread his diplomatic pitch. Grant issued a formal order for Lew Wallace to "inspect" forces at Brazos Island. He sent Wallace without any formal credentials and clearly told him not to make any proposal in the name of the U.S. Government. It was purely a "fishing expedition", but Grant put a warship at his disposal for the trip and assured him that, if he could arrange a surrender offer, it would have Grant's support in order to get government official approval. His trip and proposal are well documented. The bait being offered to Confederates was a plan to join forces and drive Maximilian out of Mexico. A large portion of the Confederacy had nursed that idea with hopes that a slice of Northern Mexico could be taken over and set up as a new slave territory."

Among other things Wallace did offer that the Texas Confederate forces would be permitted to retain their arms for use in Mexico. Slaughter and Ford stated that they were not authorized to act in any manner regarding any proposals. When they forwarded transcripts of the talks, marked "top secret" to Gen. Walker in Houston, he was outraged by its contents and criticized both for transmitting it to him. He soundly rejected any "proposal of surrender apart from a general surrender of the Confederate Government." All later learned of Gen. Lee's surrender of his Army of Virginia to Gen. Grant at the Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865. This didn't occur until May 18. According to Pierce, on May 1, 1865 the total number of Union soldiers in Cameron County and under the command of Brig. Gen. E. B. Brown was 1,915 of which 1,165 were Colored. This agreement was broken when 30 year old Col. Theodore Harvey Barrett, who commanded the forces at Brazos de Santiago, precipitated an attack on Rebel forces at White's Ranch. Barrett, a native of New York, was a new politically-appointed officer who possibly had political ambitions for the postwar period. Barrett had enlisted in the army on September 15, 1862 as a 2nd lieutenant of the 9th Minnesota Infantry. This unit

had seen little action except for skirmishes with Native American tribes. Barrett was promoted to captain in the regiment on August 29, 1863 and on December 29, 1863 colonel of the 62nd Infantry U S Colored Troops.

He may have wished to pad his resume, which to that time had little of merit in it. Another theory posited was that he wished to capture Brownsville before the valuable cotton bales there could be moved across the river to Matamoros. Still another theory holds that his action was commenced with the idea of gaining control of the custom house in Matamoros. The custom house remained a lucrative entity despite the city's unsettled governance. In addition to his command of the 62nd Infantry (Negro), he was in charge of the 34th Indiana, the Morton Rifles, a New York regiment commanded by Lt. Col. Robert G. Momsen, and some Texas cavalry commanded by Brownsville man, Col John L. "Jack" Haynes.

He asked his commander General E. B. Brown "for permission to demonstrate against the Confederates." This request was denied, but Barrett moved ahead despite the orders given to him and over the protests of Lt. Colonel David Branson of the 34th Indiana. One historian goes so far as to contend that Brown himself may have ordered the attack in order to seize the valuable 2,000 cotton bales stored in Brownsville warehouses. Initially Barrett had planned to move into Point Isabel and likely on to Fort Brown which he may have believed would soon be evacuated by retreating Confederates. Bad weather had changed this strategy. On 5/11/65 Barrett had dispatched 250 men of the 62nd U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment (Missouri) and 50 unmounted men of the 2nd Texas Cavalry Regiment USA under the command of Lt.-Col. David Branson. First Lieutenat Hancock and Second Lieutenat James were officers on the scene. The Rebels, believed to be 65 in number, were not at White's Ranch when the Union soldiers arrived at 2 a.m., so they moved about a mile and a half further and settled down for the night in brush along the river. Sympathetic Mexican forces alerted the Confederates to the Union soldiers' presence. The next morning (the 12th) Branson sought action with a group of Confederates at the Palmito Ranch about 1 ½ mile above White's Ranch. In a brief morning skirmish concluded by noon, the Union soldiers drove Confederate Capt. W. N. Robinson and his 190 men of Lt. Col. Giddings's Texas Cavalry Battalion back toward Brownsville. Three Confederates were captured along with two horses, four cows, and the 10 days rations which had just been issued.

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The Union forces advanced this day to Palmito Ranch, reaching it between seven and eight a.m. and again encountered Robinson, who had been instructed by Ford to maintain contact with Union forces until reinforcement could be sent. A skirmish ensued after which the Confederates retreated. All stores found were burned as well as the ranch buildings after which time the Union forces then moved forward against a resisting but outmanned CSA force. With his troops needing rest Barrett fell back a mile and a half to a bluff on Tulosa Ranch and dug in at this point. The 34th had already taken its position here. The ranch was southwest of Palmito and 12 miles east of Boca Chica.

Ford assembled the Second Cavalry troops loyal to him and Col. Santos Benevides' Texas Cavalry Regiment (all told about 300) and six pieces of artillery. Barrett in his later report characterized these as 12 pounders. These were augmented by Robinson's men. By 11 a.m. May 13 Ford's cavalry was on the scene. By mid-afternoon near Rancho San Martin Ford sighted Col. Barrett's force. He issued orders for a two-pronged attack. At 4 p.m. Jones' artillery, some manned by French volunteers, commenced a bombardment creating considerably terror in Union ranks. The Union force had no artillery to answer back. Ford's aggressive cavalry in its flank attack quickly had the 34th Indiana and the 2nd Texas on the run. The Union skirmish line was broken. One hundred ten men under captains Miller and Coffin and lieutenants Foster and Mead had been left behind as skirmishers. A dramatic cavalry charge by Captain Robinson broke this defensive line. Forty-eight were captured. Within a few hours the outcome was clearly in favor of Ford. Erroneously Barrett had come to believe that he was outnumbered by a two to one margin. He ordered a retreat, but picket lines to be manned by soldiers of the 62nd were not initially established to slow the attacking Confederates. Three times through the seven mile retreat the Union troops made temporary stands. Chaos prevailed as Barrett ordered the retreat of his Indiana forces but failed to do so for the skirmish line Morton Rifles under Lt.-Col. Morrison. Ford pursued the enemy to Cobb's Ranch, which was two miles from Boca Chica. He then broke off the engagement, as thoughts of cutting off the Union troops with his small force might have imperiled them if they were trapped between the retreating force and reinforcement coming from Brazos Island.

After a victory had already been assured the Confederates, Gen. Slaughter was to arrive late in the day along with the battalion commanded by Col. Thomas C. Cater. He now exhibited the desire to take full advantage of the chaos and ordered the tired troops to resume battle. Ford however was commanding both exhausted men and horses. He felt that the firing would alert Union forces on the island who would then reinforce Barrett. Slaughter with a somewhat fresher force moved to cut off the retreating Union soldiers who would have to move across a narrow levee that spanned a tide-water slough. Fortunately for them the Federals were able to move the majority across the morass to where a bluff afforded a defensive position. As the sun set that day the Federal forces had been driven all the way back to Brazos Island. Were it not for 140 men of the 62nd Colored Infantry who formed a skirmish line north from the river to effect a somewhat orderly retreat by the remaining Union soldiers, losses would have been great. The CSA's Captain Carrington, perhaps with overtones of racial prejudice, later stated "Branson's Negro regiment was quickly demoralized and fled in dismay." Once on the island the Federals could be covered by fire from a Union sloop of war and the confrontation drew to a close. The vainglorious Slaughter with his belated arrival would ride toward the island and empty his pistol in a showy display of bravado. Union soldiers were fully 300 yards away.

Scattered fire from both sides was exchanged for a short period. A shell, possibly from the *U. S. S. Isabella*, landed between the two forces. A 17-year old Reb got overexcited and blasted away with his Enfield rifle in the direction of the explosion. "The last gun had been fired."

John Jefferson Williams of the 34th Indiana Volunteer Infantry is documented as the last man killed at the Battle at Palmito Ranch and hence the last soldier to die in an active skirmish of the Civil War. In the four-hour fight, twenty to thirty Federals were said to have died (some drowning while attempting to swim the river to Mexico and some even killed by Mexican sympathizers). Barrett's August 10 report to headquarters of the Third Brigade noted 111 Federal casualties, both dead and wounded. Fehrenbach states that the 34th Indiana had lost 220 of its 300 complement. In fear of losing their lives some had thrown down their arms and surrendered though most of Hancock's company escaped capture. This statistic appears to be inflated. Nine Union men sustained wounds while one hundred eleven men and four officers were captured by the Confederates. Still another historian believed 30 Federals were killed and 113 taken prisoner. The prisoners were soon released by Ford regardless of their origin, that is, even the "Southern renegades" among them. Later reports to the Union commander stated that many of Haynes' Texas Unionists were shot after they surrendered. Haynes himself was spared. Other combatants suspected that "most of these Southern deserters had died fighting rather than surrender."

Was it lax discipline on the part of the 34th Indiana and Morton Rifles under Col. Morrison that resulted in "the relative disorder of its retreat"? In a calculated attempt to clear himself Barrett would later prefer charges of misconduct against Morrison. At the court martial Ford crossed from Mexico to testify. Morrison was exonerated. Ford later wrote that Barrett "seemed to have lost his presence of mind" and to have led his troops

off the field in a "rather confused manner". It is with some irony that the last battle of the Civil War was a victory for the Confederate States of America.

Col. Barrett was discharged from the army on January 19, 1866 and returned to his home in Herman, MN where on July 20, 1900 he was to die about a month shy of his 66th birthday.

In May 1965 on the centennial anniversary of the Civil War, United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans organizations met in Brownsville. A pamphlet titled "Battle of Palmito Ranch" was published. Its synopsis of the last battle ran as follows: May 11, 1865. – Col. Theodore H. Barrett, commanding Brazos Island, ordered Lt. Col. David Branson, with 250 men, by ferry to Point Isabel at 4 A.M. Due to a storm and ferry trouble, the troops could not cross. Later Branson was ordered to cross at Boca Chica with 250 men of the 62nd U.S. Colored Infantry and 50 men of the 2nd Texas non-mounted Cavalry. Crossing was effected at 9:30 P. M.

May 12, 1865. – At 2:00 A. M. they arrived at White Ranch expecting to capture a Confederate out-post of 65 men who had left a couple days before. At 8:30 A. M. Branson and his men started for Palmito and soon skirmishing started with some 190 Confederate cavalry. The Confederates were pushed back beyond Palmito and the Federal Forces stopped to rest at Palmito. While there, strong Confederate forces appeared and Branson fell back to White Ranch for the night. He sent a message to Barrett that night telling him of the situation.

May 13, 1865, -- Col. Barrett and 250 men of the 34th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, under the command of Lt. Col. Morrison, arrived at daybreak. On Barrett's order the Federal troops advanced and soon skirmishing commenced. The Confederates were pushed back towards Fort Brown beyond La Tulosa. Afterwards, the Federals fell back to the high ground at La Tulosa. At about 3:30 P. M., the Confederates under Col. John Salmon (Rip) Ford, now in command, opened their cannon fire and their cavalry tried to turn the Federal right flank and gain their rear columns. The Federals started falling back, leaving 48 men of the 34th Indiana Infantry deployed as skirmishers. These men were captured by the Confederate flanking movement. The federals continued retiring towards Boca Chica using 140 men of the 62nd U. S. Colored Infantry as skirmishers to cover for about 4 hours. Victory belonged to the South.

One last footnote needs to be added to this account. It was on May 30, 1865 that the Confederates conceded the inevitable and surrendered Brownsville to Union forces without a fight. "Three days later, General Edmund Kirby-Smith, commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederacy surrendered the last Confederate army to the United States and brought the Civil War to a close." The Confederate soldiers, now released from any military obligations, quickly dispersed in all directions, taking their small arms with them.