The Battle of Marshall

A Self-Guided Civil War Driving Tour

October 13, 1863

The Civil War Battle of Marshall was fought at this and other locations on October 13, 1863. The day-long battle pitted approximately 1,800 Federals, commanded by Brig. Gen. Egbert B. Brown, against force of about 1,200 Confederate raiders led by Col. Joseph O. Shelby. During the course of the battle, Union forces attempted to encircle and divide Shelby's troops, but the wily Confederate commander and his raiders fought their way out of the entrapment and withdrew in two columns. The Battle of Marshall was the culminating event of Shelby's 1863 Raid into Missouri from southern Arkansas.

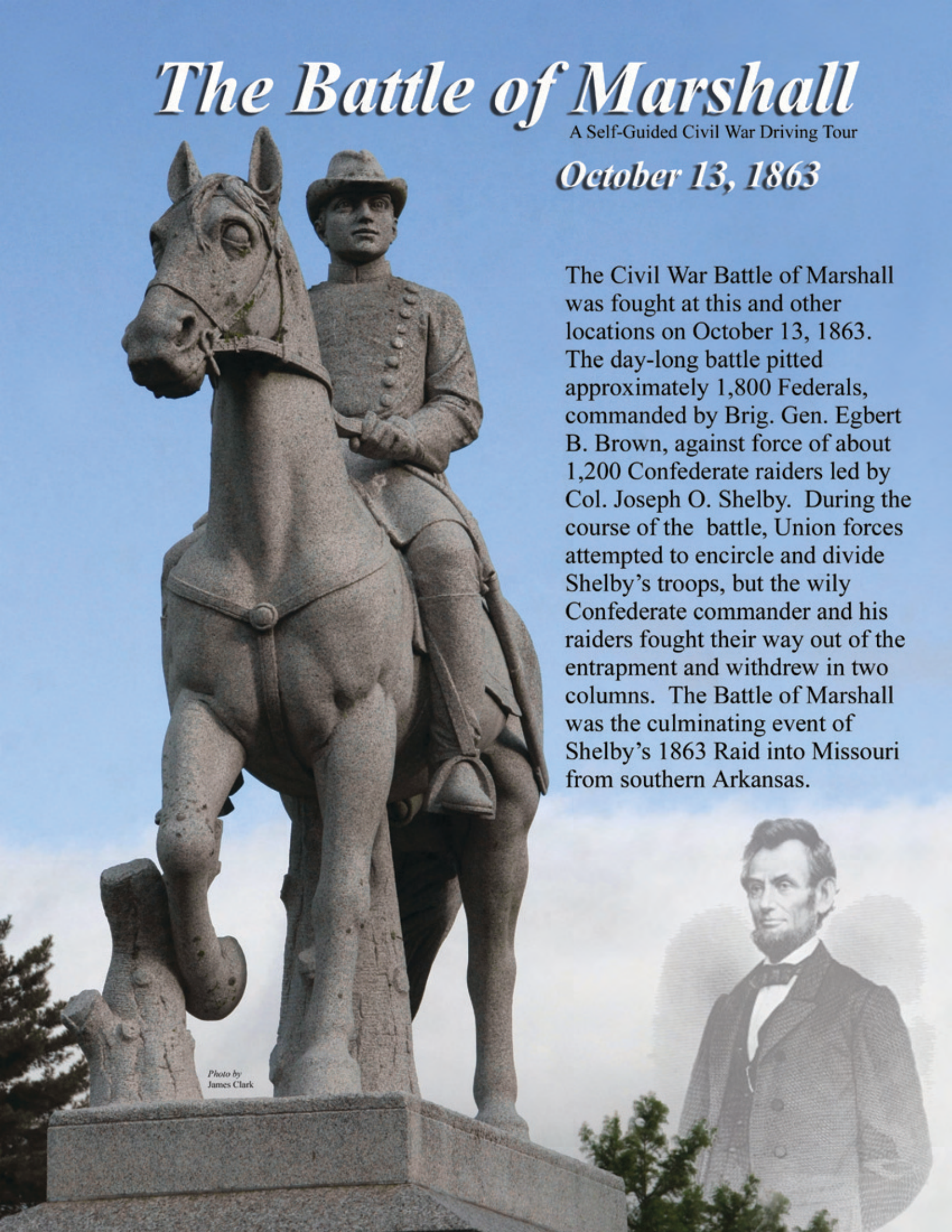


Photo by
James Clark

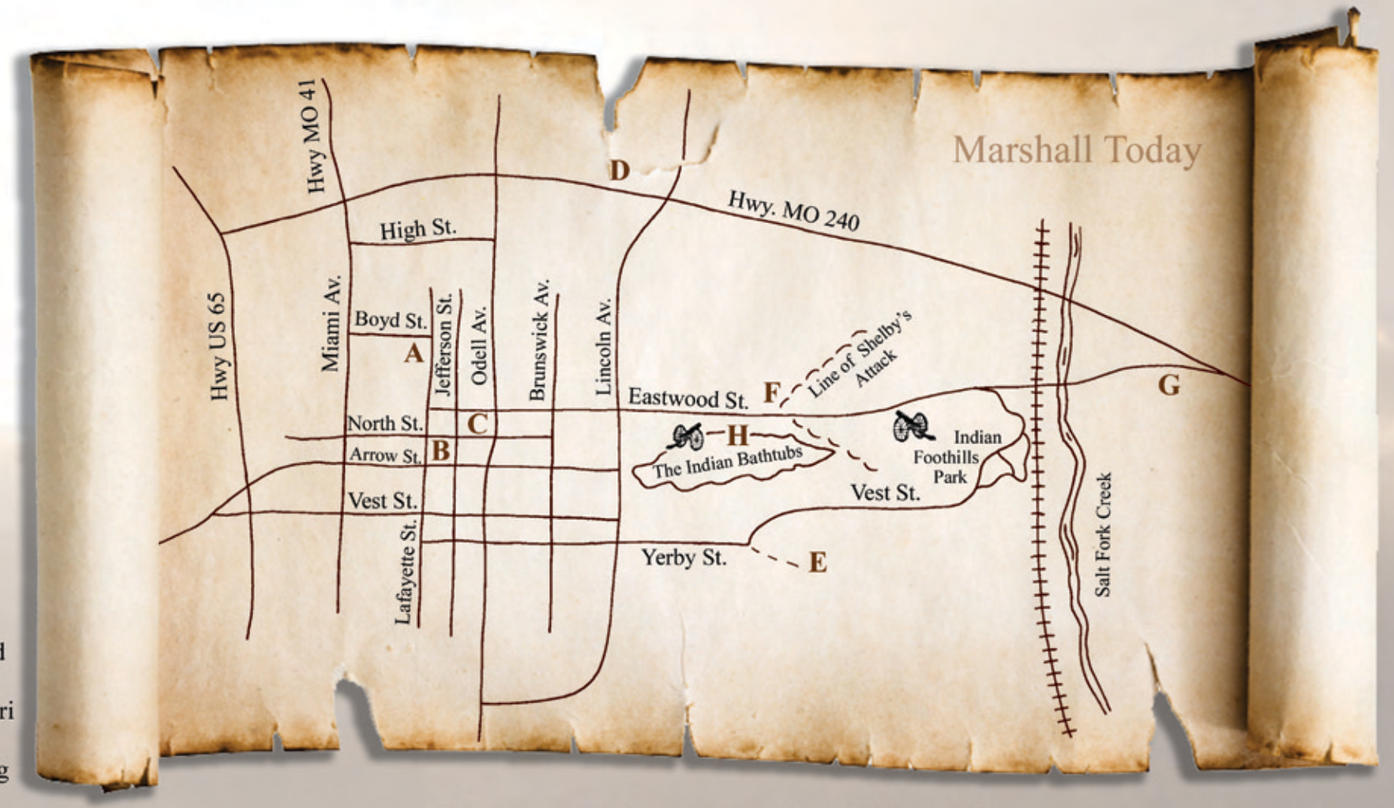
Background

By the fall of 1863, the capital of Arkansas, Little Rock, had fallen under Federal control and the Confederate army, temporarily commanded by Maj. Gen. Sterling Price, had been driven south of the Arkansas River. Col. Joseph O. Shelby chose this time to approach Price with a bold plan to lead a force of cavalry into the heartland of Missouri and launch a series of lightening strikes against Federal outposts. He hoped such a raid would keep Missouri troops form leaving the state to reinforce a Union army under siege at Chattanooga, Tennessee. Along the way he would gather Confederate recruits and rekindle the spirit of hope and resistance in the hearts of southern sympathizing Missourians living under Federal control. Shelby received Price's approval to proceed and the promise of general's star if he succeeded in his daring expedition.

Shelby's Raid

The military expedition known as Shelby's Raid began on September 22, 1863, when Shelby's brigade, comprising 600 men, rode out of Arkadelphia, Arkansas. At Bentonville, Arkansas, Shelby's column was increased by 200 men, under Col. D. C. Hunter; the next day, October 2, he crossed into Missouri where another 400 men, commanded by Col. John T. Coffee, fell in, swelling Shelby's total force to 1,200 cavalrymen. On October 4, Shelby struck Neosho where he captured 180 Union militia, confiscated arms and equipment, and burned the courthouse.

Until the capture of Neosho Federal commanders in Southwest Missouri were unaware that Shelby's brigade was rampaging in Missouri. At this time the Union military presence in Missouri was composed primarily of state militia units, widely dispersed, performing garrison duty in towns, who spent much of their time chasing bands of guerrillas across the countryside. Union commanders in Southwest Missouri immediately began to alert officers to concentrate at several points as rapidly as possible and try to intercept the Confederate raiders. The surprised Federals moved too slowly, however, to close with Shelby's swiftly moving horsemen who continued to gallop northward, eluding Federal forces, scattering militia garrisons, capturing towns, leaving smoldering ruins of courthouses at Greenville and Stockton.



Brown takes up the Pursuit

By the time his riders reached Warsaw, Shelby was in the district of Brig. Gen. Egbert Brown, an officer that Shelby has failed to defeat ten months earlier (January 8, 1863) at the Battle of Springfield. Brown would chase Shelby across 300 miles of thickly timbered country, a grueling three-day pursuit that Brown carries out without forage, rations or camp equipment. In an effort to intercept Shelby, Brown moved from Clinton to Osceola with Col. John F. Phillips and 800 men of the Seventh Missouri states Militia Cavalry. At the same time he ordered Lt. Col. B. F. Lazear and 670 men of the First Regiment Missouri State Militia Cavalry to move east from his position at Clinton until he came upon the trail of Shelby's Raiders.

On October 11, Lazear's advance guard finally caught up with Shelby's rear guard four miles south of Boonville and in the fading light of day, skirmished with his pickets. Shelby's men, meanwhile, rode triumphantly into Boonville that afternoon and cheered the sight of the Missouri River, nearly 350 airline miles distant from where they had set out nineteen days earlier.

On the morning of October 12, Lazear discovered that Shelby had moved out of Boonville during the night, heading in the direction of Marshall, and he began an immediate pursuit. Shelby posted Maj. G. P. Gordon at Dug Ford on the Lamine River to ambush Lazear's column. A Federal charge across the ford cleared the enemy and Lazear continued the chase. Shortly, General Brown came up with Phillips troops and took the advance. With the Federals pressing his rear guard, Shelby made another stand at Salt Fork Creek, near Jonesborough (today's Napton). The two sides exchanged artillery fire until nightfall, at which time Shelby moved out and halted within six miles of Marshall. While the Federals bivouacked on their arms at Salt Fork Creek.

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Brown's united force now number about 1,800 men plus four pieces of artillery, while Shelby had 1,200 men plus, perhaps, 200 recruits that he had gathered on his way thought Missouri, and two pieces of artillery, including a piece captured from General Brown at the Battle of Springfield. Brown knew that he would have to get in Shelby's front in order to compel the elusive cavalryman into decisive action. To accomplish this, Brown sent Lazear and his force, now swelled to 1,000 men, on a late night march around Shelby's left flank to establish a position in his front while Brown would march at daybreak and assault the Confederate rear.

Lazear's command was in Marshall by sunrise on the morning of October 13, and within and hour his pickets on the Arrow Rock road (today Eastwood Street) rode up with the report that Shelby's Confederates were advancing in force.

Shelby rapidly forded Salt Fork Creek (just north of this location) and posted the regiment of Maj. David Shanks at the crossing to delay Brown's column while he hurled the remainder of his force on the Union troops to his front. Shelby evidently thought he was facing the 4,000-man strong force of Brig. Gen. Thomas Ewing, and he wanted to attack and defeat this force before Brown could fall on his rear.

While Lazear organized his troops in line just east of Marshall to meet the coming attack. Maj. G.W. Kelly was sent forward with the fourth Missouri State Militia to slow Shelby long enough to allow Lazear to establish his defensive position. He placed his two pieces of artillery in the center behind Maj. A. W. Mullins and three companies of the First Missouri State Militia Cavalry. On the Union left, he positioned Maj. William Gentry's battalion of the Fifth Provisional Regiment Missouri Enrolled Militia.

Upon making contact with the advance guard under Kelly, Shelby halted, dismounted his men and arrayed them in line of battle. Lt. Col. J. C. Hooper's regiment formed the left while the center was composed of the regiments of Maj. G. P. Gordon and Col. Benjamin Elliot, and the right was made up of the regiments of Cols. D. C. Hunter and J. T. Coffee. Kelly, in the meanwhile, his mission fulfilled, retired to the rear of the Federal center to form a reserve force.

A ***BENSON EXECUTION*** Near the corner of Boyd and Lafayette Streets, local Doctor J. W. Benson was executed in August, 1863. He was charged with riding with Captain Quantrill during the raid on Lawrence, KS. It was a fact he readily admitted, but he claimed he was there as a surgeon only. His last request was that they not shoot him in the face. Several other Confederate "bushwackers" and sympathizers also met a similar fate in Marshall.

B ***SALINE COUNTY COURTHOUSE*** On August 10, 1864, the Union garrison abandoned Marshall as Confederate General Sterling Price began his raid into Missouri. As soon as the Federals left, Confederate Colonel W. S. Jackson, and approximately twelve men, entered town and torched the courthouse. The courthouse had been used by the Federals as a headquarters and barracks. As the building burned, several local women danced with glee around the flames. General Sterling Price's army would pass through Marshall October, 1984, on their way to the Battle of Westport in Kansas City.

C ***ROCK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH*** The Rock Presbyterian Church, located at 212 E. North Street, in its present configuration was constructed in 1871. The church had it's beginnings in 1840, just one year after the town of Marshall was incorporated. Federal troops used the church during the Civil War as a barracks and to stable their horses. After the Battle of Marshall, the church also served briefly as a Union Hospital.

D ***ODELL CEMETERY*** Odell Cemetery, dating back to 1834, is Marshall's oldest graveyard. Here is the final resting place of Jerimiah Odell, who gave 65 acres in 1839 to start the town of Marshall. Also buried here is John A. Hix, possibly the town's first physician. He died of Cholera in 1849.

E ***RIDGE PARK CEMETERY*** Ridge Park Cemetery, once part of the Mooney Farm, was the initial burying location for the Confederates killed during the Battle of Marshall. All five were later reinterred to other cemeteries. Today the cemetery contains the Dennis Brothers Monument. The equestrian statue is a composite of both the Confederate and Union soldier. Austin Dennis fought for the South and Davis Dennis fought for the North. The horse represents "Turk", on which Davis rode back to Missouri after the conclusion of the Civil War. A monument to the Battle of Marshall is also located nearby with a list of Confederate veterans buried in the cemetery.

F ***EASTWOOD*** Along the hills and ravines rising west from the Salt Fork, 1200 Confederate cavalrymen, led by Colonel Joseph Shelby, fought a brigade of 1600 Missouri Militia Cavalrymen led by Brig. General E. B. Brown. The line of battle was roughly between the viaduct of Business 41, south to Watermill Road, which during the war was known as Hook's Mill Ford. Shelby, moving west along the Arrow Rock road, had posted his artillery (a six-pound smoothbore, and a ten pound Parrott rifle) along the high ground after crossing the bridge over the Salt Fork. Major Shanks had also posted his battalion near the bridge and contested Brown's advance across the creek. The remainder of Shelby's men advanced and fought west towards town.

G ***MONTEGUE HILL*** Montegue Hill was the location of Brown's two six-pounder cannons, under the command of Lt. Charles Thurber. The road that snakes down into the creek valley is the original road from Arrow Rock. A small wooden bridge would have been located at its base. General Brown would have observed the Confederate line at this location.

H ***ROBION SPRINGS*** During the summer of 1861, 3000 Confederate "State Guards" from north and central Missouri gathered here at Robion Springs. They were described as being "well organized" and possessed tents. Here they trained, gathered provisions, and waited to be sent to the eventual fighting. Many of these men, including several from Saline County, fought in the Battle of Boonville, and later Wilson's Creek and Lexington.

Shelby first sent Hooper's regiment against McGhee's position on the Federal right. The Confederates had to charge across a deep ravine into the face of heavy rifle fire from the Federals. This proved too much and Hooper fell back. Next, Shelby unleashed Elliot and Gordon against the Federal center held by Mullins. Three charges were repulsed. Then Hunter and Coffee fell against the Federal left defended by Gentry. Gentry's militiamen fell back in the face of this charge but rallied at the edge of town and held their position. Major Kelly's battalion was moved to the left of Gentry to shore up the Federal left and prevent a Confederate flanking movement.

By then the battle has been raging for a hour and a half or more, and Lazear's position had held fast against repeated Confederates charges. At this time, Lazear's men heard a boom of Federal artillery and knew that the forces of General Brown had come up and were attacking the Confederate rear, held by Shank's regiment. General Brown sent the battalions of Majors Houts, Foster, and Suess, backed by two sections of artillery, against Shank's position on the west side of the bridge over Salt Fork Creek. They battled Shanks for an hour. Meanwhile, Brown moved the remainder of his command under Phillips three-quarters of a mile south around the left flank of the Confederate positions and dispatched Phillips to attack the Confederate left. As his dismounted men moved forward to attack, Phillips saw the Confederates moving north to escape. He then remounted his men and circled around to take up a position on the left of Kelly to prevent a Confederate breakout.

Shelby's Breakout

As the Federals moved around his position, Shanks slowly withdrew toward the main body of Shelby's troops, fighting all the way. Shelby was meanwhile mounting his force and preparing to break through the Union left and escape to the northwest in the direction of his hometown, Waverly. At this moment, Major Kelly led the Fourth Missouri States Militia Cavalry in a charge through Shelby's lines that split the Confederate force in tow, separating Shanks, Hunter and Hooper from the rest of Shelby's command. Before Brown could close the trap, Shelby broke through the Union line and led the commands of Coffee, Gordon, and Elliot along with his trains of ammunition and captured Federal goods northwest toward Miami. Shelby did lose one of his two pieces of artillery to Brown as he withdrew, bringing the score to one captured cannon apiece for the two commanders.

Shanks, Hunter, and Hooper, meanwhile, swung off to the right, crossed Salt Fork Creek and retreated down the Arrow Rock road (today's Highway 41). Phillips pursued Shelby's force for the rest of the day while Lazear moved west to intercept Shelby when he turned south, and Houts chased after Hunter, Hooper Shanks.

Aftermath of Shelby's Raid

Various Union forces pressed the two columns of Shelby's raiders hard as they retreated toward Arkansas. The raiders were forced to destroy their train of captured goods. Back in Arkansas, near Bentonville, the two columns reunited and on November 3, 1863 the exhausted men of Shelby's Raiders rode into Washington, Arkansas, and halted at last.

Shelby had conducted a textbook raid, the longest raid at 1,500 miles, of the Civil War for either side, Shelby's reputation as the best cavalry leader in the Trans-Mississippi West, and one of the top cavalrymen of the Confederacy, was indelibly established. And Shelby finally received his force, captured Federal garrisons. More doubtful is Shelby's claim that Federal reinforcements were kept from heading across Mississippi.

General Brown, too, could be pleased. He had faced the redoubtable Shelby twice in 1863 and emerged victorious both times-a claim few other Union generals who tangles with Shelby could make. His Missouri militiamen had faced down the battle-hardened troops of one of the South's most redoubtable warriors and sent them retreating southward, their captured Federal property strewn in their wake.

Marshall
MISSOURI
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