

Battle of Painter Creek

(From the Macon Chronicle-Herald, June 29, 1976,
as related in *History of New Cambria* by Mike Brown, n.d., rev.)

The traditional story of the Battle of Painter Creek began in early August of 1862 and saw just one soldier killed, a Confederate who was trying to swim his horse across the creek. That story was printed in the 1910 Macon County history by Edgar White after the story was told to him by an old man called "Uncle Charley Coleman." There were no records to back up the tale, but Uncle Charley told them that he had been there and remembered it all.

The official version makes the battle a major one in which at least 22 were killed and 60 wounded. It refers to "Panther" Creek, another name for "Painter" Creek in those days. Panthers, or mountain lions, were sometimes called "painters" in the local slang. (From "War of the Rebellion : Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies," this excerpt from Series I, Volume XIII, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885, as written by Col. McFerran and attested by Maj. James Rainsford, Assistant Adjutant General of St. Joseph.

"On the 6th of August, a notorious guerrilla and outlaw named Wicklin was shot, and on the 7th, a notorious guerrilla named Daniel Hale was also shot by our troops in the forks of Grand River. The guerrillas in the forks of the Grand River were scattered in all directions by troops from this post.

"On the 9th (8th) Lieutenant-Colonel Woolfolk, with about 400 men, attacked Porter's band of about 1,500 men on Panther Creek, near where the Hannibal and Saint Joseph Railroad crosses the Chariton River, and after an engagement of six hours, night put a stop to the conflict.

"In this engagement, it is reported that Porter lost 20 killed and 50 wounded and Lt. Col. Woolfolk had two killed and ten wounded. Lt. Col. Woolfolk will make a detailed report on this engagement to your headquarters.

"On the night of the 9th (8th) I joined Lieutenant-Colonel Woolfolk, with 130 men, under Lieutenant-Colonel Thompson of the Fifth Cavalry, Missouri State Militia. Early in the evening, after the engagement, Porter began his retreat north along the Chariton. Our men were on the march about 2 o'clock the next morning in hot pursuit, and came up with Porter's rear at Walnut Creek, where they had prepared an ambush for our reception. A few rounds of canister put them to flight and we continued in pursuit. About 4 o'clock in the afternoon we came up to his rear guard, at Sears' Ford, up the Chariton River, where an engagement took place, in which we had 1 killed and 10 wounded of the First Regiment of Cavalry; 7 of the First Infantry; and 3 of the Fifth Regiment of Cavalry, all Missouri State Militia, among them Captain Peery of the First Regiment, and Sergeant-Major Linville, of the Fifth.

"Porter's loss is unknown, but must have been considerable. One we know was mortally wounded, and an eye-witness represented the ground they occupied as bloody, and indicated that many had been killed or wounded in the fight and removed.

"We turned back from the Chariton, not being able to get our artillery and ammunition over the river, and, our men being exhausted; we reached Laclede on the

night of the 12th instant, and on the next morning joined General Loan and began the pursuit of Poindexter.

“All officers and men constituting my command behaved with great gallantry and energy, and it would be invidious, if not possible, to discriminate where all did their whole duty so nobly.

“All of which is respectfully submitted.

“Your obedient servant, James McFerran.”

Traditional Version

The following story of the Battle of Painter Creek was taken from *The History of Macon County, 1910*:

Occurring on Aug. 8, 1862, it was, possibly, one of the most curious engagements of the Civil War. Not a man was killed or injured by ball or bayonet, though the “fight” began before noon and continued until dark. One man, a confederate was drowned while trying to swim his horse across the stream. That was the only casualty.

The encounter between Colonel Joseph Porter’s Confederates and some Federal regiments under General Wolfolk was part of a wide-spread plan to surround and capture Porter with the 2,000 recruits he was trying to get southward for service in the Confederate Army.

Porter was only concerned in breaking through the Union lines. He knew the greater number of his men couldn’t fight, had no discipline and had never been under fire. But he was in the heart of a section swarming with Federal militia and government troops, and it was impossible to get out without a battle. Some 500 of his men were seasoned, and could be relied on to execute orders under fire. The balance were mostly young farmers, good riders, but not used to posing as targets.

There had been a pretty severe encounter between McNeil and Porter at Kirksville on Aug. 6, 1862. Many Confederates were killed or captured, but Porter drew off his men and hurried southward through the rough wilderness of Macon County. The vigilant McNeil, learning his route, ordered a strong force to move westward and intercept the fleeing Confederates.

Charley Coleman was then a young farmer lad living about the hills bordering Painter Creek bottoms. Someone informed the Federal authorities that he had piloted Porter and his shattered army through the woods, and he was summoned to Macon and put under a heavy bond to refrain from further friendly acts towards the “rebels.” Later Coleman thus described the only battle that ever occurred on Macon County soil:

“It was two days after the fight at Kirksville, in which Porter got the worst of it,” said Mr. Coleman. “I was living with my step-father on the second bottom of Painter Creek in Valley Township. Mart and John Souther and myself learned that Porter was coming south and we went up toward Goldsberry to meet him. We met old Mr. Bradley, and he said he had seen ‘an awful big army’ pass north of him; he supposed they were Federals. We rode on in the direction of the army, and learned instead of Federals they were Confederates, Porter’s men. The whole prairie seemed to be

covered with soldiers. It appeared to me there were enough men to put the whole government out of business. It didn't occur that there might be several times as many of the other fellows, but I learned something before the day was over.

"We were cordially received by the officers, and rode on southward with the troopers. A great many of the men were wounded, had their arms in slings and handkerchiefs tied around their heads. It was so close to the Kirksville fight that the raw recruits were still in a state of panic, looking about at every sound, as if expecting an enemy. All were terribly hungry and weary. When we reached my step-father's, the women folk got busy cooking things to eat and passing out food as fast as they could. Some of the troops were so hungry that they seized the meat before it was done and began devouring it.

"There was no apparent attempt at discipline. The soldiers just scattered over the place, eating and resting, their guns lying wherever they happened to throw them. While in this unprepared state, a courier, on a foaming horse, galloped in shouting, "The Federals are coming!"

"It was worse than if he had warned them of an approaching cyclone. The terrible Federals had licked them at Kirksville and now, many miles back in the wilderness, they were still pursuing. They imagined Federals rained from the clouds; they seemed to be everywhere. In a moment the camp was in the wildest confusion. Some of the recruits fled without waiting to see what a Federal soldier might look like. One youth in his eagerness to get away jumped his horse into the creek and was drowned.

"But the panic didn't extend to Porter and his seasoned officers. They shouted orders across the fields and soon had the force whacked into line, and positions were taken where the creek embankment could be used as a breastwork. I thought of a couple of horses I had, and in order to save them from the Federals I started down on the bottoms, intending to hide them behind a bluff. When I got there, however, I found the place taken by Porter's frightened recruits, and women and children, all anxious to get out of gunshot range.

"The Federals had taken their positions on the bald knobs, and were pouring into the Confederates what seemed destructive fire. Porter replied, his men fighting stubbornly, not giving an inch. Once or twice the Federals started to rush them, but a hot fire sent them skeltering back to cover. It was pretty evident that all of Porter's men were not panic-stricken. His fire seemed to be the most effective and I believed if he had rushed the Federals he would have sent them flying back on the jump. But his object was to save his recruits, and he couldn't afford to take chances.

"At one time a rider rushed up to the settlement and announced that the Confederates had been 'cut to pieces'; that Porter was a prisoner and the survivors were scattering over the prairie.

"But I noted the firing kept on steadily, growing hotter from the Confederates' side as the sun went down, and slackening over on the hills where the Federals were.

"Nobody did anything that day but watch the battle. From the terrific discharges of musketry we imagined the ground must have been covered with slain. I didn't see how human flesh and blood could last a minute under such a riot of smoke and fire. The woods were canopied with smoke, and the smell of gunpowder filled the air clear

out to where the terrified spectators were. We supposed the war was being settled right then and there, that history was being made same as at Naseby, Waterloo and Yorktown.

“During all this frightful hubbub, this carnival of death and destruction, Miss Lizzie McKittrick, who taught the district school in the neighborhood, was the only quiet and self-controlled person in the zone of shot and shell. She kept her students steadily at their books, and went about her school room tasks same as if nothing more exciting than a Sunday School picnic was happening over on Painter Creek. She could hear the sound of musketry, the cries of the soldiers and the roar of the cannon same as we could, but she didn’t worry a bit. Her duty was to keep her scholars out of gunshot range, and she did that by closing the doors and refusing to let anyone go out.

“It was getting towards dusk when we heard a bugle sound amid the bald knobs, and soon the news came that the Yankees were retreating. Then we went out to bury the dead, and what do you think? There wasn’t a man killed on either side except the young Confederate who jumped his horse in the stream! The two armies had shot enough lead at each other to sink a battleship, and yet there were absolutely no injuries.

“Porter rounded up his men and withdrew to the north, the direction from whence he came.”